

The Confrontation of the Roman Catholic Church with the Economic and Social Development in the Philippines in Relation to the Influence of the Social-Theological Position of the II Vatican Council*

by
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The beginning of the "crisis" in the Roman Catholic Church came with the response of some groups in the Church to the "Spirit" of the Vatican Council II. At the beginning, no one had defined exactly what the "Spirit" of the Council really was, but Catholic students, laymen and priests founded their organizations with the view of applying the "Spirit" of the Council in the Church. For many of them, it meant then the "opening" of the Church to the world and the reform of the Church. Since both elements are closely

related, students, laymen, and priests have been drawn practically together demanding from the Hierarchy a "dialogical atmosphere" in the Church and a more relevant Church involvement with the potentially explosive condition of Philippine society. Because the Philippine Hierarchy was and is essentially conservative and authoritarian, a "religious clash" within the Church ensued.

Almost over-night the Roman Catholic Church found herself caught-up in a "crisis" both internally and externally, which

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gradually gained significance and manifested itself as the crisis of leadership in the context of the Church as the "People of God" and of a relevant Church in the context of society. For the first time, the picture of the Philippine Roman Catholic Church as "an autocratic body of bishops governing a cowed and apathetic clergy and laity"¹ began to crumble. Responsible for or at least participants in setting the whole "crisis" in motion were and still are: (a) Catholic students under the Laymen's Association for Post Vatican II Reforms (LAPVIIR) and the Christian Social Movement (CSM), (b) Philippine Priests, Inc. (PPI), a nationwide association of priests (secular and religious) for mutual development in the spirit of V.C. II, and (c) the Philippine Hierarchy. The problem-complex, which has so far been denoted simply as the "crisis" or the "crisis of leadership and relevance" must be understood under two further aspects: first, the pressure of the revolutionary condition of Philippine society and the "reforming spirit" of V.C. II affected radically some segments of the church, leading them to a discovery of a new role in the Church

for the society; and secondly, the demands, which accompany the practice of this role in the Church have not found immediate acceptance from the Hierarchy. But this confrontation in the Church of the present social problems and the social teaching of V.C. II has left no choice for the Hierarchy but to re-think its own role not only within the Church as the "People of God" but also in the society as well.

Thus, the objects of this investigation are the contemporary R.C. Church in the Philippines, her socio-ethical teachings before and after V.C. II with reference to the present state of Philippine society. It is a study of her self-understanding and function in a society, of which quantitatively she is represented by a major part. This need not become a "pure" sociological treatise, in which the Church as such is simply regarded and understood as a "social institution," without any reference to her own claims or faith in relation to or expressed in her work and service in society. Neither can it be a theological treatise alone, in which the Church is understood only through her "divine origin" with

*Pro Mundi Vita (PMV), No. 30 (Brussels, 1970), p. 45.

unchangeable laws universally valid for all times as if the Church as such could be isolated from her sociological setting and continue to exist without being affected by her surroundings. The Church must be seen and understood in her own setting, in a situation where she presents herself in "words and programs."

This investigation limits itself to the official letters, statements, and other publications of the Church, which articulate her socio-ethical and socio-theological teachings. I have made separate critical analysis of the letters and statements of the Hierarchy, the priests' and the students' in order to show what kind of "crisis" has been going on in the Church, at the same time, in order to indicate what changes have taken place in the thinking and behavior of the Church because of this inner "crisis." As far as possible, I have referred only to the facts, figures or critical positions about the socio-economic and political situation of the country, which have been mentioned or called to attention by the Church. By this, I intend not only to confirm the fact that the Church has paid attention to them, but also to confront the Church with the situation with which she must live

and communicate her faith and from which she must correct her theology. Out of necessity, however, I have depended on the studies of others in the fields of social, economic and political sciences and used their methods critically. I have not written a history of the R.C. Church in the Philippines, and there is also no claim that all aspects of her existence in society have been considered. I have applied nevertheless, a historical-critical analysis of the materials, institutions, and events directly and indirectly related to the whole theme.

SUMMARY

After this investigation it has become clear that here are a number of issues or questions concerning the R.C. Church in the Philippines that have not been discussed. It should not be a surprise since I have indicated the limit of the study from the start — a limit, which has been governed by the formulation of the main subject. Now the result of this study should give us an insight into the self-understanding of the Church and her function or task as she confronts and is being confronted with the socio-economic problems of the Philippine society.

A. The contemporary R.C. Church has maintained a long inherited tradition, which for her has become in the course of history both an advantage and a problem. Her union with the State in the past, in the so-called *Patronato system*, bolstered the spread of Catholic Christianity among the inhabitants in the islands, so that in a relatively short period the Christianization of the country became a fact. The State in turn had benefited from this relationship, in that together with christianization the colonization process also took place or vice versa.

This Church-State collaboration enabled the Church-above all the different Religious Orders – to strengthen her temporal power through the acquisition of large tracks of land. Together with her “spiritual role” the Church used the temporal power – personified by most missionary-priests in towns and villages – to help govern the new colony: a practice, which nourished the abuses of many a missionary-priest, caused difficulties with the State and later sparked the Revolution of 1896. At the turn of the century, when the United States of America took over the colony from Spain, the Church had to sell a large portion of her

lands and give up the temporal power. But the influence of the Church upon the society and the inhabitants was far-reaching enough that its effects still remain today.

The sign of this influence can be seen easily in villages, towns and cities all over the country: churches at the center of towns, Catholic schools and colleges, hospitals, social projects, fiestas honoring the various patron saints, etc. The Church has succeeded in bringing into the country a R.C. Christianity, which the majority have embraced, a Catholic education, various charity works and a culture of Ibero-European origin. But these achievements still reflect the past colonial tradition – the reason itself why questions are now being raised against them.

The Christianity of the larger mass of the people is a mixture of pre-Christian elements and the Catholic faith resulting in a “folk Catholicism,” a Catholicism far removed from that represented by the Hierarchy. Catholic education for so long has only catered to the interests of the rich and has not been adapted to the needs and culture of the people. The various social works of the Church people are not reaching root-causes of the socio-economic problems of the

society. The "Official Church," represented by the Hierarchy and the different Religious Orders, has become herself the bearer and guardian of this past tradition; a tradition which consists not only of the teachings and practices of R.C. Christianity of Spanish origin, but also of the achievements (and stigma) of the colonial period.

The Church has laid the ground-work for "folk-Catholicism" and contributed towards the formation of a feudalistic form of society. There are two known reasons, which explain the phenomenon of "folk-Catholicism": first, the early converts to Christianity were baptized without having enough instructions on the faith; secondly, many who were baptized had not enough Christian nurture because of the lack of priests. Today, the lack of priests is more acute than ever and the solution for it is not yet to be seen. This would mean that a gap between the "official Church" and "folk-Catholicism" will continue to grow, except when Catholic lay movements intensify their work with the masses in regard to the teaching of the Catholic faith interpreted in their own setting. How are they enabled to do this is rather a difficult question to answer, since there is hardly a favorable condition for it. The masses them-

selves have been brought up for centuries into an "authoritarian and monastic" form of Catholicism so that the question comes, whether it can be expected of them to practice their "mixed Catholic faith" freely in connection with the daily concern of man in society.

The "official Church," holds fast to its role as the guardian of "the Catholic Faith" (meaning all the Church teachings and practices brought from Europe during the period of Christianization) and as such, she must exercise spiritual and moral authority to propagate and defend it. Another factor must be noted together with this: the Church has retained the image of a colonial landowner and, consequently, she has been associated with the rich and the powerful. This state of affairs makes it difficult for the Church to advocate effectively the cause of the poor; and more often her charity works or social projects have been understood as remedy for the symptoms, not for the root-cause of the social problems in the country, which is injustice. Thus, the "official Church," what she is and what she does, has not only become a part of the "Establishment," but became also a "guardian" in the maintenance of it.

B. The socio-economic and political problems of the Philippine society are not wholly the product of the Independence of 1946, but the outcome of "a society with a long history of injustice." The Church has been a major part in this society all along and in such a condition there has begun a critical inquiry into the role of the whole Church. Catholic students, laymen and priests have organized, after having been encouraged by the result of V.C. II and challenged by the acute socio-economic and political condition of society. They have discovered anew their respective role in the Church, which they tried to exercise together with the Hierarchy. Organizing into groups, claiming to play one's own role in the Church freely and demanding from the Hierarchy the reform of the Church—all these together had not happened before in the Church's long history in the country.

The confrontation which ensued between these "reform" groups and the Hierarchy has significant consequences for the Church: Reform and renewal are necessary before the Church can communicate the Message of the Gospel and become relevant to the

socio-economic concern of man. Reform must begin by questioning the concepts and practices of the Church, which stand against the "spirit of V.C. II." For the Catholic students and the priests, it means first of all the exercise of authority as service for the whole "People of God," and not primarily a moral or spiritual instrument to rule over them, whether such authority comes from the bishop or priest. Consequently, this needs a new structure of communication in the Church, which is dialogue. A dialogue between the bishop, his priests and the laymen (in contrast to the order-obedience scheme) on the tasks and problems of the Church promotes not only trust, but reasonable obedience. It is a possibility opened to the whole Church through which she could discover anew her self-understanding and identity. The social message of the Church through the pastoral pronouncements of the Hierarchy and the statements of the "reform" groups reflect not only a concern of the Church *for* the poor (the tendency of the earlier Pastorals) but a solidarity *with* the poor and their cause, coupled with a determination to transform it into a program of action.

Evidently, the confrontation has revealed a picture of the Church characterized by a variety of concepts, interests and concern. The "reform" groups themselves maintain that these are not a sign of division in the Church, but of growth. This "crisis of growth" makes it almost certain that unity through uniformity is and can no longer be a self-explanatory character of the R.C. Church in the Philippines. The tendency is more to maintain the unity of the Church, in which variety or plurality has its rightful place. The three concepts applied to the Church, that have come out in the course of the confrontation ("People of God," Prophet and Servant) are themselves indicative of this tendency. The concepts describe the character and

role of the Church significantly, especially in the context of the present condition of the Church and the society. The implication or emphasis attached to them by Catholic students and the laity has not been always acceptable to the Hierarchy; nevertheless, a change of attitude among the bishops in their relationship to the clergy and the laity has been taking place and dialogue as a new structure of communication in the Church has been affirmed.

In what form a "prophet-servant Church" shall function in the present society, is still to be seen; but some basic pre-requisites for the various segments of the Church, as "People of God," to exercise their respective roles have been laid for the future. ■