

CHURCH'S RESPONSIBILITY IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

*By C. C. Ganchorre**

Recent events have clearly shown that in our struggle to face squarely our very serious economic situation the church and state should combine their resources to explore ways and means to effectively solve the gnawing problem. The World Council of Churches, the Protestant Christian expression of the ecumenical movement, sponsored last July a World Conference on Church and Society in Geneva, Switzerland. To express the urgency of the task of the conference, M. M. Thomas of India, chairman of the planning committee, said: "The church has to rethink its own understanding of the material and human realities of the contemporary world, and define afresh its own responsibility in relation to them. The World Council of Churches is bringing together representatives of the human sciences, those involved in developing new forms of society, and theologians to look at the bearing of the revolutionary situation on Christian discipleship, and to help the churches in developing a relevant ministry in and to society (9:5)." The recently concluded National Congress for Rural Development sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church both underscores the seriousness of our economic situation as well as augurs the possibility of a new day in our country.

In this speech before the Manila Rotary Club Monsignor Luigi G. Ligutti, papal delegate to the National Congress for Rural Development, emphasized the need for unity of all sectors of society in solving widespread rural poverty brought about by "inefficient use of both natural

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and human resources. Your failure to unite will spell failure even if you think you have succeeded. . . . There should be emulation not competition and what is really most essential, the people themselves must be involved totally, consciously and whole-heartedly." Pointing to "our dynamic sense of nationalism and 'new' Christian ethics of social responsibility" as "the forces of motivation that will sustain our national 'will to develop,'" President Ferdinand Marcos concluded his message to the Rural Congress: "It is thus. . . that the Church, as well as the State, Christianity as well as democracy, can establish beyond doubt, their relevance to the wounded masses of the modern world. . . in the only way both the masses and the elite can understand."

It seems to me that a fundamental reason for the late realization of both the church and state to cooperate in meeting the pressing needs of the people is our misunderstanding of the principle of the separation of church and state. Yoshiaki Iisaka, professor of political science of Gakushuin University, Tokyo, has this helpful understanding: "The principle of separation of church and state is rightly understood to mean that each shall be true to its respective tasks and perform its proper functions, without trespassing on or interfering with the other's domain. There is a danger in the church's becoming the state, and in the state's becoming the church. If the church is concerned with politics for the sake of politics, it will become perverted; and if the state demands worship from the people and absolutizes its own ideology, it will become the demonic monster of Revelation 13. But separation does not imply indifference: An institutional and functional separation does not preclude friendly relations and close cooperation. The church's concern for the state is based upon its mission to protect human life and to care for the human soul. When necessary, therefore, it will assume a watching role, interceding, warning, criticizing, protesting and even resisting, according to the needs of the situation. On the other hand, the state has a right to administrative su-

pervision of the church — as of other social organizations and associations — within the limits set by law. It also has a duty to secure the greatest possible freedom for the church.” (2:326)

In the light of that understanding the role of the Christian in society is described by Iisaka thus: “The Christian citizen belongs to both church and state. He has to represent and to participate responsibly in both. He has to exercise his citizenship according to the decisions that he takes as a member of the believing community, and he will play his part in the church’s mission in the world of politics through a serious assumption of his citizenship. Thus, though there is a strategic organizational separation, there is no existential separation, because responsible church membership cannot be divorced from responsible citizenship (3:326).” This brief but pointed discussion of Prof. Iisaka may serve as a helpful guide for us as church and state seek to cooperate in the common task of rural development.

There are three areas in which the church can cooperate with the state. First, the church should strive to bring about unity among the people. The ecumenical movement has ushered in the spirit of openness and understanding among those who hold different convictions and beliefs, for it stands for honest and informed dialogue as a way to arrive at truth and understanding. According to Saint Paul, the great apostle to the Gentile world, the church has been “entrusted with the message of reconciliation.”

Many of our responsible leaders believe that in spite of our being a republic, we suffer from cancerous disunity found in our regionalistic and tribalistic attitudes. The ailment is complicated by our dismal failure to define our national purpose. What is there to give us a sense of direction? The fog of confusion that hangs heavily upon us must be the inevitable result of our grievous lack of national unity and purpose.

Through its preaching, education, training and parti-

icipation in daily life the church and the individual Christian can help establish an enduring sense of national unity and purpose.

Secondly, the church should work more speedily at the matter of overhauling its traditional and worn-out attitude toward material wealth and its place in the life and well-being of man. Traditionally, we were taught that our only concern should be the salvation of our souls. The body is evil, and it is the prison house of the soul which when released at physical death will go to heaven to join its Creator in eternal bliss. We are not to have serious interest in and serious concern for material wealth which could be a cause for our separation from God, our eternal damnation.

In reaction to this we think that the Christian lives in creative tension, for while he lives in this world, he is also a citizen of heaven. He has dual citizenship. But his citizenship in heaven does not free him from his responsibility on earth. His citizenship in heaven gives quality and character to his participation in the life of the world which God so loved in Jesus Christ (John 3:16). The Christian vocation in this world is "the reclamation of the human situation, the renewing of life, the redemption of the tragic character of existence, the mutual ministry of reconciliation to all men" (5:21) as he comes truly an instrument of the love of God.

Our traditional view of material wealth leads to irresponsible use of the gift of natural resources. The destructive exploitation we have made on our fish, forest and land is unmistakable evidence. The natural resources we have in our country are the Creator's gift to us so that we may live our life in abundance with no *have-nots* permanently victimized by the *haves*. Besides, we can serve the Creator and our fellow man generously when we have something to share. Our traditional view discourages creative production and use of food and wealth. One produces food just enough for his immediate needs. After all, one

has to leave behind his wealth when he dies. But that is selfishness, for we should work hard while here on earth so that we may not only provide adequately for our needs but that we may also leave behind our contribution to those who come after us.

When we consider our material resources as gift from the Creator, we develop and use them with responsibility. Our country's economic development has been deplorably retarded by our traditional view of material wealth. However, healthy signs of change of thinking are taking place both in the Roman Catholic and Protestant branches of Christianity. "God intended the earth and all that it contains for use of every human being and people. Thus, as all men follow justice and unite in charity, created goods should abound for them on a reasonable basis. . . (1:278)." One suspects though that the thinking expressed in the Rural Congress and in the World Conference on Church and Society as well as in the Vatican II ecumenical meeting remains merely on the top level of the church leadership or hierarchy. Many priests and pastors are far behind in their thinking on the issue. Alas, they are the ones in frontline of the battle against poverty! Says Fr. Jaime Bulatao, S.J.: "Only if the priests are raised to be open to their contemporary environment and are endowed with scientific, problem-solving attitudes will they be able to take the first step toward change, which is becoming aware of a problem."

Finally, the church should keep the moral and spiritual climate in our country clear and sharp. The fact that our society is shot through and through with moral corruption, that it suffers from an anemic spiritual foundation, is a clear sign that the church has failed to develop and maintain a strong moral and spiritual climate that is fundamentally needed as solid foundation for nationhood. Writing about the Rural Congress in his daily column, *Light and Shadow*, Alfredo R. Roces hit the point bull's-eye: "How far the Catholic Church will succeed in its new venture remains to be seen, because to be painfully candid, the various ventures of the Church into labor movements, or as

in the last election — politics, have proven to be a surrender to the very forces the Church sought to change. It would seem that the basic problem of the Catholic Church in the Philippines is that it finds itself being swallowed up by the mechanics and values of our society, instead of being the factor of change (6).” Continuing his discussion in another issue, Roces went on to say: “The ever weakening influence of the Church may be partly attributed to the fact that its moral influence on the *haves* has not been uncompromising enough. The *haves* display a poverty of social consciousness, while the material needs of the *have-nots* have been attended by moral influence. If the Church is to seek a genuine concern for the material wealth of individuals, particularly in the rural areas, it must look into itself for a clear yardstick of material values...” (4) In its God-given mission, its *raison d’etre*, the church has that needed “clear yardstick.” The Protestants, on the other hand, have not been able to get out of their religious inferiority complex to effectively play the role of being a creative minority.

The late Albert Camus, a non-Christian, protested against the vagueness and hesitancy of the church’s proclamation of the good news or condemnation of evil in man and society. “What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak out, loud and clear, and that they should voice their condemnation in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could rise in the heart of the heart of the simplest man. That they should get away from abstractions and confront the blood-stained face history has taken on today. The grouping we need is a grouping of men resolved to speak out clearly and to pay up personally... Possibly it (Christianity) will insist on losing once and for all the virtue of revolt and indignation that belonged to it long ago. In that case Christians will live and Christianity will die (7:53 & 59).”

Without becoming abstract the church should sharpen its theological reflection to penetrate our society from its leaders to the common *tao* “in the only way both the mass-

es and the elite can understand." President Marcos called for "a 'new' Christian ethics of social responsibility." The church should fearlessly give warning where warning is needed; it should boldly criticize where criticism is required; it should even resist where resistance is demanded by the situation. On the other hand, it should give praise where praise is due; in prayer it should intercede for those in authority. In the words of Prof. Harvey Cox of Harvard, the church should take its "theological reflection" as its "coming to consciousness about the meaning of contemporary events in the light of history... (as) a way of taking responsibility both for the reshaping of the past and the constitution of the future... The church looks to the hints God has dropped in the past in order to make out what He is doing today (8:254)."

When the church takes seriously its task of developing and maintaining a clear and sharp moral and spiritual climate, it is securing well an enduring foundation for the country. "The social order requires constant improvement. It must be founded on truth, built on justice, and animated by love; in freedom it should grow every day toward a more humane balance. An improvement in attitudes and widespread changes in society will have to take place if these objectives are to be gained" (1:225).

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