

## TEACHING MORAL THEOLOGY ACCORDING TO THE SECOND PLENARY COUNCIL OF THE PHILIPPINES

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The Council presents us all with a vision for the renewal of the Church, the whole Church in the Philippines.

This is our vision. That all may have life —

We shall have to create a free nation:

where human dignity and solidarity  
are respected and promoted;

where moral principles prevail in socio-economic  
life and structures;

where justice, love and solidarity are the inner  
driving forces of development (no. 253).<sup>1</sup>

This excerpt from the conciliar vision shows its breadth of concern and the depth of its motivation: "all Filipinos" (no. 250), "a free nation," "human dignity and solidarity," "moral principles prevail in socio-economic life and structures," "a civilization of life and love" (no. 255). It is not for the fainthearted nor for those weak in faith!

### INSPIRATION AND CHALLENGE

1. Numbers in parentheses within the text refer to the marginal numbers of the Conciliar Document in the official edition of *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* 20 January — 17 February 1991 (Manila: Secretariat, Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 1992). (Henceforth *Acts and Decrees*.) The Decrees are referred to by the number of the article.

This vision is at once an inspiration and a challenge. An inspiration because of the richness of its content and its appeal to all our best Christian and human instincts; a challenge because it is so far removed from the grim reality facing us on every side. The Council depicts this reality with admirable honesty, spelling out the contemporary socio-economic picture with all its immoral, dehumanizing consequences. But trusting in Christ, basing the vision on Gospel values leading ultimately to the Kingdom, the Council dares to call for a Pentecostal-like renewal of the Church and of the face of the earth in our corner of the Lord's vineyard.

### THE ECONOMIC REALITIES

Using the latest available economic statistics, the Council shows why its overwhelming concern for the poor is the only response worthy of true followers of Christ, who announced his mission as of one sent "to bring glad tidings to the poor. . . . to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free" (Lk 4:18-19) (no. 38). The Council gladly identifies with him whose "entire life was a testimony of this love of preference for the poor" (no. 48).

### BELOW THE POVERTY LINE

Half of the Filipino people live below the poverty line and so are lacking some of the basic necessities of life. "Appalling mass poverty is undoubtedly the most tragic aspect of Filipino life. It is the social problem."<sup>2</sup> At the same time "In stark contrast to the prevalent poverty are pockets of great luxury, a fact which underlines the gross inequality of income distribution which has long marked our economy."<sup>3</sup>

In comparison with other countries the Philippines is seen as having "one of the most unequal income distributions among middle-income countries." With a preferential option for the poor, the Church must face these alarming and depressing socio-

2. *Ibid.* 276.

3. *Ibid.*

economic truths and search for a solution. The Council ambitions a sea change: "Tilt[ing] the center of gravity of the entire community in favor of the needy" (no. 134). In the words of Pope John Paul II, "Before today's forms of exploitation of the poor, the Church cannot remain silent. She also reminds the rich of their precise duties. Strong with the Word of God, she condemns the many injustices which, unfortunately, even today are committed to the detriment of the poor" (no. 131).

#### REACTION OF MORAL THEOLOGIANS

The moral theology professors of the Philippines cannot help but feel a strong obligation to funnel their talents and energies into this Church-led crusade to form a community whose center of gravity is tilted in favor of the poor. It is a matter of love and justice, of concern and compassion, of identifying as Christ does with the least of these his little ones. Even in the face of alienation and persecution by the rich and powerful, the moral theologians must spell out the obligations to change the sinful structures that keep half the people below the poverty line and allow a minority to enjoy a life of scandalous luxury.

The social problem has been identified: appalling mass poverty, the most tragic aspect of Filipino life. The squatters' shacks, the Smokey Mountains, the street children, the sickly beggars, the unemployed — these are the little ones, the "anawim." Their very existence should sear the conscience of a true follower of Christ. The moral theologians must strive in their class lectures, in their writings, in season and out of season, to stress the Council teaching and instill in all audiences a holy discontent, a burning desire to bring about the changes so sorely needed to fulfill the vision of the Council in line with Gospel values and the inspiring social teaching of Pope John Paul II.

#### THE RESPONSE OF THE RICH MINORITY

The Council knows from sad experience that they must be courageous in defending and vindicating the rights of the poor and the oppressed "even when doing so will mean alienation or persecution from the rich and powerful" (no. 131). Such

persecution from rich and powerful Catholics has happened in many parts of the world. The Philippines is no exception. Still the Council hopes for a true metanoia, a conversion of the rich, so that they will also embrace this preferential love for the poor and "The Church will then become truly a communion, a sign and instrument for the unity of the whole Filipino nation" (no. 136).

#### THE HIERARCHY AND THE CLERGY IN THE CHURCH OF THE POOR

The Council expects that the pastors and leaders of this "Church of the Poor" will show the way in their preferential love. They "will not compete for the most prosperous parishes or offices, and will not ambition for titles and honors as they cherish in their hearts the words of the Lord . . . Rather, they will live simply in order to share what they have with the needy. They will follow the example of Christ, and thus set an example for others" (no. 133).

#### A TRUE CHURCH OF THE POOR

When this renewed Church becomes truly this Church of the Poor, "the poor will feel at home in her, and will participate actively as equal to others, in her life and mission. The Church will then become truly a communion, a sign and instrument for the unity of the whole Filipino nation" (no. 136).

#### SIN, MORAL EVIL IN SOCIAL STRUCTURES

The Church in the Philippines is immensely rich in human resources. Experience shows that given a chance the Filipino quickly succeeds when he goes abroad or works for a multinational.<sup>4</sup> But the feudal, aristocratic structures, manipulated by "the grasping paws of greed for profit and power" keep the majority of Filipinos poor in their own country . . . It is sinfulness that is at the root of our socio-economic and political problems, and we need to name the problems by their true name of sin

4. Cf. *Acts and Decrees*, 283.

(no. 266).

Every moral theologian must react instinctively to that request of the Council!

#### CONFRONTATION WITH SINFUL STRUCTURES

Confrontation with sinfulness is called for as preliminary to social transformation. The Council insists that "the beginning of this journey is an encounter with Jesus who calls us to confront and confess our sinfulness and the sinfulness of the social systems we have built" (no. 264). Unless the sinful structures are changed the injustices will be perpetuated. The Council equates "structures of sin" and "*social sins*" (no. 270). It describes them as "situations, collective behavior, or structures that cause and perpetuate social injustices." The *sinful attitudes* which create the sinful, unjust structures are "the *all-consuming desire for profit*, and . . . the *thirst for power*, with the intention of imposing one's will upon others."

#### THE LIMITS OF PRIVATE PROPERTY RIGHTS

In condemning this greed and thirst for wealth and power, the Council emphasizes the *universal purpose* of earthly goods and private property (no. 297). The words of Vatican II are cited reminding us that God's plan in creating the earth and all its potential wealth was that "all created things would be shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity."<sup>5</sup> Also cited is Pope John Paul II's denunciation of the unjust distribution of goods and services originally intended for all as "one of the greatest injustices of the modern world" (no. 297).<sup>6</sup>

In spite of these clear and very emphatic teachings of Vatican II and Pope John Paul II, the opposite teaching is still in possession in the Philippines. The Council could scarcely be more emphatic in condemning the prevalent opinion among the rich in the Philippines concerning private property with all its

5. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 69.

6. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 28.

harmful consequences for the poor, whether rural poor or urban poor.

An almost exclusively privatistic view of private property has contributed to the wide chasm between the poor and the rich and the increasingly oppressive deprivation of thousands of Filipino families (no. 298).

#### CONVERSION OF THE RICH RE PRIVATE PROPERTY AND LAND REFORM

In spite of the great obstacles, unjust structures, bias, greed, hunger for power, the Council calls for the total conversion of the rich minority to "Orthopraxis, and not rejection, of the Catholic social teaching on private property" (no. 298). Their conversion is called "a burning imperative in our situation."

All moral theologians should see in those words a need to prioritize their emphasis on what Pope John Paul II calls the "social mortgage" on private property (no. 302). This is a teaching that has echoed down through the centuries in the Catholic Church. The Fathers of the Church thundered their denunciations of the rich landowners and the Church has never ceased to affirm their teaching as in Vatican II, and in the words of Pope John Paul II.

#### A JUST WAGE: THE KEY MORAL QUESTION

The justice of wages is the key problem of social justice in the teaching of Pope John Paul II.<sup>7</sup> For our Pope "In the context of the present, there is no more important way for securing a just relationship between the workers and the employer than that constituted by remuneration for work."<sup>8</sup> The justice of the socio-economic system, and in each case, its just functioning, deserves in the final analysis, according to the Pope, "to be evaluated by the way in which man's work is properly remunerated in the system."<sup>9</sup>

7. *Laborem Exercens*, no. 19.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

The reason for such Papal stress put on just wages is because the wage paid is "a practical means whereby the vast majority of people can have access to those goods which are intended for common use: both the goods of nature and manufactured goods."<sup>10</sup> The Pope insists that wages are the *key* means of checking the whole socio-economic system even if "it is not the only means."<sup>11</sup>

#### MORAL THEOLOGIANS AND THE MINIMUM WAGE

With this Papal insistence on the just wage, a professor of moral theology must constantly condemn the Minimum Wage which is so far below the poverty line as to make it a starvation wage, a malnutrition wage for any family that would have to depend on it. And what about the condemnation of those who do not even pay this "malnutrition wage"! It is the evil of liberal capitalism in its worst form. The lower the pay for the worker, the more profits for the employer. No question whatever of morality!

#### THE COUNCIL AND WAGES

Using wages as the means of checking the justice of the local socio-economic system, the Council uses the strongest language in rendering a negative moral judgment. "The Christian conscience must recoil at the sins committed against the poor: so many workers are denied just wages in order to maintain the standard of living of the few who are already in possession of so much which the poor can never possess; poor farmers continue to till lands that they will never own; economic and political power is used selfishly to serve the interest of the few and keep the poor at bay" (no. 267).

Could there be a stronger condemnation of the whole local socio-economic system than that tightly packed sentence of the Council concerning wages as actually paid in the Philippines? The number of workers even in the government service living

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

below the poverty line changes but little from year to year. The slight improvement in 1988 still leaves 49.5% below the poverty line, "extremely high, even by comparison with our neighboring countries."<sup>12</sup> Almost half the people lack the basic necessities of life!

#### A WAGE ABOVE THE POVERTY LINE

Only a wage that puts the worker above the poverty line could ever be considered moral in any nation, in any economic context. Any employer who alleged that he could not afford it would have the burden of the proof. He might be excused temporarily but he has a constant moral obligation to keep adjusting his procedures until he satisfies his moral obligation. There can be no question of profits until the debt to the employee is paid.

#### THE FAULT OF THE EMPLOYERS

A talk by Howard Dee in July, 1990 echoed the teaching of the Church on wages and held it up as a reasonable, feasible, economically sound financial position. Speaking as a very successful local businessman, this former Ambassador to the Holy See dared to tell the Makati Businessmen that "It's time the elite realize it is the cause, the prime cause, for what ails the country. . . . The best means to empower the people is through just wages."<sup>13</sup>

Examining the usual reasons of the businessmen who refuse to increase wages, Howard Dee demolished their arguments by showing how little the total cost of production is affected by the cost of labor — "a mere 5%." A 20% wage increase would mean "a minuscule 1% increase in total manufacturing costs; a 50% wage increase will increase total cost by only 2.5%, way below the annual inflation of over 10%." Philippine labor increased its productivity but real wages deteriorated and Dee cites a comparative study of ASEAN labor showing the Philippines with "the second highest productivity but the lowest wages, even

12. *Acts and Decrees*, 276.

13. *Veritas Newsmagazine*, 9 July 1990, p. 3.

lower than Indonesia with a population double ours." He notes that the real wage in 1988 is "lower than that of 10 years ago."

#### FILIPINO WORKERS FORCED TO GO ABROAD AS DOMESTICS

An example from Dee's Italian experience was most revealing and most embarrassing for the Filipino businessmen. Dee noted that thirty years ago the Italian women were the domestic help of Europe. Today 150,000 Filipinos are domestics in Italy. The Italian workers were paid good wages and they were able to hire the poor, underpaid, unappreciated Filipinos! Filipino teachers working as domestics in Hongkong is another classic example of what happens when wages are unjust, distorting and rendering immoral the whole socio-economic system.

#### REACTION TO HOWARD DEE'S SPEECH

The Makati Businessmen gave him a standing ovation. They could not refute his economic arguments. It was a most powerful defense of the social teaching of the Church on wages. Perhaps these businessmen need the follow up that the Council offers to encourage them to overcome their natural greed and launch out into the deep in search of the pearl of great price that Christ offers.

#### LIBERAL CAPITALISM IN THE PHILIPPINES

For many local entrepreneurs their ideology is liberal capitalism of the worst variety. The Council reaffirms the Church's rejection of this amoral approach to business and notes that "We ourselves have experienced the most evil features of the latter in our country" (no. 371). The Council condemns the modern capitalists for their insatiable desire for profits resulting in its own practical atheism that "has created its own morality — that what is profitable is moral." Local development "has so far been determined by the economic factor with a bias for the minority controlling sector of our society." (A preferential option for the rich minority!)

#### ECONOMIC RESULTS OF LIBERAL CAPITALISM

The results of what socio-economic development the Philippines has known leaves the Philippines as "one of the poorest in Asia with one of the most unequal distributions of wealth and income" (no. 371). Immoral business practice has led to economic disaster. Surely it is time to give morality a chance! The Catholic business community cannot be proud of what they have wrought, acting like practical atheists and ignoring the social teaching of the Church.

#### TAXATION: ANOTHER AREA OF SOCIAL SIN

One of the most deeply imbedded sinful structures in the Philippines, one often noted and condemned by local and foreign observers, is the imbalance in taxation. The Council highlights the evil in its Appendix I: The Contemporary Philippine Situation.

Aggravating the imbalance between rich and poor is a system of taxation that is biased in favor of the more well-to-do. Poor families pay 27% of their income in taxes, whereas the higher income families pay only 18%. At the same time, government social services in health and housing hardly reach those most in need.<sup>14</sup>

#### INCOME TAX

In most modern nations the welfare of the majority is taken care of, sometimes with a remarkable degree of security, "from the womb to the tomb." This calls for enormous sums of money which the governments raise by taxing according to income. But income tax for the rich in the Philippines is insignificant since the government relies more on indirect taxes which hurt the poor more than the rich. The result is a class of "Super Rich," the ones to whom the local advertisements appeal to buy "the ultimate in luxury living" in the new condominiums where they can live far above the squalid squatters' huts, away from the pollution, enjoying maximum security, thanks to the most

14. *Acts and Decrees*, 277.

sophisticated electronic devices! "Keep the poor at bay" (no. 267).

#### POLITICIANS NOT CONCERNED WITH JUST TAXES

It must be noted with sadness that in the recently concluded electoral campaign, the candidates shied away from all mention of any change in legislation concerning taxes. That means that the government will be forced to give the same answer to the request for more health services, more hospitals, more clinics, more health workers, as well as to other basic needs such as housing and roads: NO MONEY IS AVAILABLE. Since the politicians are almost all from the wealthy aristocracy it will take a complete change of heart and mind to bring them to introduce legislation that would limit their own and their family wealth. Yet the Council aims at just such a change: "tilt[ing] the center of gravity of the entire community in favor of the needy" (no. 134).

#### HIGH RATES OF INTEREST: A STRUCTURE DEMANDING CHANGE

A recent article in the *Philippine Newsday*, May 29, 1992 by Manuel M. Serrano pinpointed high lending rates as the "mother of all economic banes."<sup>15</sup> He cites a leading economist to the effect that high interest rates "permeate all levels of society with corrosive effects . . . it tilts the balance widely in favor of capital-rich foreign investors to the chagrin and despair of local entrepreneurs . . . the costs of all goods and services unduly spiral . . . it fuels inflation, decreases wages and income."<sup>16</sup>

The Marcos era's infamous Presidential Decrees 116 and 858 are the source of this economic evil, according to Serrano, since it removed the 12% interest cap and allowed the interest rate to float freely. This resulted in bank profits higher than in other countries "even though the economy was posting zero, if not negative growth rates."<sup>17</sup> A *Far East Economic Review* article reported "almost unbelievable profits of the 6 largest commercial

15. *Philippine Newsday*, 29 May 1992, p. 9.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

banks in 1990, . . . a 42% increase over that of 1989 which was in turn 32% higher than the year preceding."<sup>18</sup> Serrano concludes that the record "proves without question, even to the uninitiated, that banks are profiteering at the expense of the consumers, the producers, the government and the millions wallowing in poverty."<sup>19</sup>

If this analysis of the local interest rates is true, then we are face to face with a classical example of an evil socio-economic structure. It has such an impact on the nation that it has tilted the balance against the poor. The Council aims at tilting the balance in favor of the poor. This conciliar ambition is more herculean than anticipated while also being more necessary than ever.

#### SUMMARY OF THE COUNCIL'S SOCIAL-MORAL CONCERNS

Of interest to every moral theologian will be the Council's summary of certain truths in the social doctrine of the Church which stand out as urgent and necessary (no. 291). These truths, needing emphasis today for the development of the just life and of the just society which serves that life, are:

1. Integral Development based on Human Dignity and Solidarity
2. Universal Purpose of Earthly Goods and Private Property
3. Social Justice and Love
4. Peace and Active Non-Violence
5. Love of Preference for the Poor
6. Value of Human Work
7. Integrity of Creation [Ecology]
8. Empowerment of People

Since the Council judges these concerns to be "urgent and necessary," every moral theologian should strive to integrate them into his courses on justice and seminars. The matter is more than ample for any course or courses. The moral theologian who may be overwhelmed by the challenge should take heart from the Council's own statement immediately after outlining the

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

matters that are "urgent and necessary."

We need to proclaim these principles, 'whether convenient or inconvenient — correcting, reproving, appealing — constantly teaching and never losing patience' (2 Tim 4:2) (no. 292).

The whole Church community will be working with the moral theologians seeking the same goal — the renewal of the Church and of the Philippines. This is the Church which "is first and foremost a light that illumines, a spiritual force that needs to critique the social, political and cultural fields in order to affirm, denounce, purify, or reinforce in the light of the Word of God" (no. 248).

#### KEEPING THE VISION RELEVANT

Experience shows that our visions can easily become an ivory tower daydream unless we keep our feet firmly planted in reality. One way for the moral theologian to do this is to check occasionally with the "Business News" sections of the daily newspapers. If they are reflecting the views of liberal capitalism with single-minded concentration on profits and shameless disregard of the majority, the poor, then we will know that the vision has not entered the main stream of consciousness of the business community. Moral principles do not yet prevail in socio-economic life and structures. They do not speak the language of the Council nor mirror Gospel values.

#### NO EASY VICTORY

A sample reading of current business columns in the local press, more than one year after the completion of the Council, will put the moral theologians on guard as to the magnitude of the task that lies ahead. One writer in the *Manila Chronicle* reflecting on the signs of the times in the local business world was optimistic in spite of all the obvious problems, but he entered a caveat: "China's labor is cheaper than the Philippines' and that is reason to keep wages low here."<sup>20</sup> He apparently never

20. *The Manila Chronicle*, 26 May 1992, p. 9.

read the speech of Ambassador Howard Dee that we cited above!

An article in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* on the same day, speaking of yet another massive shopping mall to be built, gushed about the corporation being debt-free in spite of its other multi-million peso constructions, and noted, with undisguised relish, that "its major shareholders are awash with cash."<sup>21</sup> Would that we could presume a better wage for the employees of these huge shopping complexes. But the reality is far different: the employers hide behind the amoral minimum wage law to keep their employees below the poverty line, while they are "awash in cash!"

#### A GROWING BUT LIMITED SOCIAL AWARENESS

One promising development in the social awareness of the business sector was revealed in a move to organize corporate giving so that there will be a pooling of corporate resources, allowing for immediate response to critical needs in time of disaster.<sup>22</sup> This is very much to their credit and shows a growing social sensitivity among businessmen as we witnessed during the calamities of the past year. But it is limited to the charitable assistance aspect of the nation's problems. It does not touch the structures, does not speak of the social transformation of sinful structures as the Council so clearly proposes.

The moral theologians must be aware of the total vision of the Council. "Preferential option for the poor" and "social transformation," "tilt[ing] the center of gravity of the entire community in favor of the poor," are non-negotiable moral concerns of the members of the Council. The moral theologians can settle for no less as members of the Church community striving for the fulfillment of the vision of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines.

21. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 26 May 1992, p. 15.

22. *Ibid.*, 25 May 1992, p. 21.