

THE MISSING GROUND IN THE EVANGELIZATION OF POLITICS: BUILDING IDEOLOGICAL POLITICAL PARTIES

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This article examines the pronouncements of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), especially as regards current political issues in Filipino society. While the institutional church has not been remiss in the call for social change, particularly in exhorting people to actively participate in process of governance, the paper argues for the urgent need of "evangelizing politics" through "principled partisan politics," whereby the laity particularly can involve in ideological political parties that can assist in bringing about authentic change in the nation's political culture and system.

This essay takes off from the Pastoral Statement of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) of 24 January 2010.¹ In this document, the Philippine bishops call for the active involvement of the laity in "principled partisan politics," which includes exhortations to candidates and voters but neglects to take up the matter of political parties.

The CBCP Statement asks the candidates to educate the people on the situation of our country and "to present their platforms and convictions rather than attack others" (Part II- C). The bishops appeal to voters to exercise wisely their right to vote, and to "follow the dictates of conscience after a prayerful and collective period of discernment" rather than be swayed by "survey results or political advertisements" (Part II-E).

1. Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, "A Call for Vigilance and Involvement" (24 January 2010 Pastoral Statement), in <http://www.cbcnews.com> (accessed February 5, 2010).

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In an earlier (12 July 2009) Pastoral Statement on “Lay Participation in Politics and Peace,” the CBCP announced a list of pastoral actions in these words:

- “1. We call upon those [lay persons] who are competent, persons of integrity, and committed to change to get involved directly in principled partisan politics, and become candidates for political election, aware that the common good is above the good of vested interests;
- “2. We remind the laity that it is within their right as well as their duty to campaign for candidates they believe to be competent, honest, and public service-minded in order to reform our country....
- “4. We commit our church personnel to the indispensable task of raising social awareness and forming social consciences through political education.”²

It is striking to note that none of the pastoral actions encourages the laity to get involved specifically in building, reforming, and strengthening political parties, which are necessary institutions in strong democracies. Strong and dialogical political parties will be more effective in the political education of the citizenry than the institutional church will be. The practice of democratic politics is not one of the core competencies of the hierarchical church, which attempts to evangelize politics by teaching and preaching primarily for the transformation of the hearts of politicians, candidates, and voters.

The church cannot consider the practice of democratic politics one of its strengths. The hierarchy remains undemocratic in that its members—the clergy—are selected in a process with little participation from the laity, who form the great majority in the church. Also, the clergy tend to be secretive about the assets and liabilities of dioceses, religious institutes, their schools, and their hospitals. Likewise, some Church organizations do not practice what is preached about the dignity of human work and the rights of workers to just

2. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, “Lay Participation in Politics and Peace” (12 July 2009), in <http://www.cbcpnews.com> (accessed August 15, 2009).

remuneration and to “participative management” in which workers are involved in decision-making.

While the Church decrees that “bishops, priests, and religious must refrain from partisan politics,”³ and teaches that the laity, and not the clergy, ought to be at the forefront of the task to renew the political community in accordance with gospel values, some high-profile clerics and religious exempt themselves from these precepts. The late Manila Archbishop Jaime Cardinal Sin (1928-2005) had been criticized for sometimes acting more like a political power broker than a prudent moral teacher. To journalist Ramon Isberto, Cardinal Sin “always appeared to relish his role as mediator, go-between, and king maker or unmaker.”⁴

In December 2006, Novaliches Bishop Antonio Tobias publicly called on members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines “to defend the Constitution” by joining the “prayer rally” against Charter Change to be held at the Quirino Grandstand in Manila, and organized mainly by the CBCP. By issuing mostly moralistic or morally judgmental statements against the proponents of Charter Change, several bishops have not helped clarify the complex and muddled issue of the strengths and weaknesses of the 1987 Constitution.

Both the church and the state have contributed to the weakness of democracy and patriotism in the country. As sociologist Arnold Alamon puts it: “The State and religion, the two institutions whose primary function is to forge social solidarity, have repeatedly failed in this task owing to their colonial origins. Instead, we continue to draw our moral identities from our clan memberships which served as our pre-colonial moral and political communities.”⁵

The bishops tend to give importance to undemocratic hierarchical authority partly because of their inherent duty to be guardians of the Roman Catholic tradition. Conservative pastors predominate in

3. “PCP II Decrees,” Art. 28 #2, in *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Manila: PCP II Secretariat, 1992).

4. Ramon Isberto, “Power of the Cross,” in *1992 and Beyond: Forces and Issues in Philippine Elections*, eds. L. Kalaw-Tirol and S. Coronel (Quezon City: Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism and Ateneo Center for Social Policy and Public Affairs, 1992), 101.

5. Arnold Alamon, “Introduction: The Poet-Citizen,” in *Nation, Self and Citizenship: An Invitation to Philippine Sociology*, Randolph David (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 2002), 266.

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an institution that asserts the apostolic authority of the bishops and the primacy of the Pope. Yet there have been turning points and conjunctions in the history of the church when, even for brief periods, the church became both conservative and radical. One such turning point was the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) in 1991.

With the participation of selected priests, religious, and lay leaders, the bishops at PCP II asserted that, for genuine and lasting social transformation, “people empowerment” is necessary—implying “greater involvement in decision-making, greater equality in both political and economic matters, more democracy, and more participation.”⁶ Nearly two decades after PCP II, however, it remains unclear to what extent the hierarchical Church is a genuine democratizing force in society.

People empowerment, the democratic process, and the transformation of hearts towards responsible governance and citizenship cannot be sustained without adequate support from functioning institutions. More than our many flawed officials and citizens and their unreliable hearts, the bigger national challenge is our weak governance institutions, weak in: (1) upholding the rule of law and basic human rights, (2) holding high officials accountable for their decisions and actions, and (3) insulating public officials from pressures of their kith and kin who tend to seek special favors.

Our bigger national challenge is to build, reform, and strengthen institutions, which comprise people, resources, and systems. Enduring and pervasive unethical practices in politics are rooted in flawed systems, which can outlast individuals and which cannot be changed without sufficient competence, imagination, strategic moves, and sustained efforts.

Stanford University psychologist Philip Zimbardo, the author of “The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil” (2007) speaks of “the banality of evil, the banality of heroism...[in which] any of us could as easily become heroes as perpetrators of evil, depending on how we are impacted by...situational and systemic forces.”⁷

6. “Conciliar Document” nos. 325-326, in *Acts and Decrees*.

7. Philip Zimbardo, “The Banality of Evil, the Banality of Heroism, in *What Is Your Dangerous Idea: Today’s Leading Thinkers on the Unthinkable*, ed. John Brockman (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), 276.

In our country, (1) the campaign finance system, in which most national candidates are dependent on oligarchs and big businessmen for their campaign funds, and (2) the absence of stable and transparent sources of political party funds produce a highly flawed system that pushes our elective officials towards unethical behavior such as graft and corruption in order to generate campaign resources for elections that are held regularly.

Systemic forces, positive and negative, affect the formation of consciences, which can be strengthened or weakened in the process. While it is true that an excellent conscience can be considered an echo of the voice of God in one's life, every conscience has to undergo formation that is a continuing process throughout every person's life. Thus, a good conscience gradually can degenerate into a doubtful, indifferent, and insincere conscience owing to periodic exposure to dehumanizing pressures or sinful forces in highly flawed systems. Sinful individuals do not constitute the sole force that can paralyze, confuse, and corrupt consciences. "Sinful social structures can harden into institutions, and result in a network or environment that effectively hinders growth in the Christian life" (PCP II "Conciliar Document," no. 82).

The weakness and flaws of Philippine political parties and the party system itself permit vested interests and oligarchic and clan pressures to weaken, confuse, and corrupt the consciences of politicians, candidates, and voters and to weaken and endanger our democracy. Strong competitive parties are necessary for a strong and inclusive democracy, where the State protects the political and economic rights of both majority and minority groups, the rule of law prevails, and there is equal opportunity for justice.

For sociologist Randolph David, the following characteristics of Philippine political parties make them very different from North American and West-European parties: (1) official membership is limited to politicians, (2) there is no regular recruitment of non-politician members, (3) there are no regular sources for party funds, (4) there are few party activities outside the election season, (5) party platforms are prepared mainly for compliance with State documentary requirements, and (6) loyalty to personalities is stronger than loyalty to the party and its ideology.⁸

8. Randolph David, "Political Parties in the Philippines," in *Reflections on Sociology and Philippine Society* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2001), 170.

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Party ideology is understood here as a politico-economic theory on how a society can best resolve or balance the competing interests of its members such as the interests of the working class and the capitalists, the very poor and the middle class, the religious and ethnic majorities and minorities, and the females and the males. While no ideology is perfect, some can be quite harmful such as fascist ideologies that give to one leader or a small shadowy group absolute authority to resolve conflicting interests in society. In our contemporary and complex times, one characteristic of a beneficial ideology is its openness to dialogue and to principled compromise or adaptation especially for the purpose of relieving or addressing collective suffering and ensuring the satisfaction of the basic needs of people.

David gave his assessment on Philippine political parties in 1996, before the *Bayan Muna* party was organized in 1999 and won seats in Congress since 2001 and every succeeding election. Bayan Muna is the party of a militant mass movement that identifies foreign domination and feudal bondage as the basic problems of Philippine society. While it is the most disciplined party and it actively builds up mass membership, it remains a minority party. Several sectors suspect Bayan Muna of being an electoral front of the outlawed New People's Army of the communist insurgency.

The bigger parties maintain their dominance partly because of patronage politics or the prevailing culture of patron-clientism and dependency especially among the masses. The characteristics identified by David are reaffirmed a decade later by Rodolfo Severino, who concludes that there are "no real political parties" in the country "through which people can articulate their preferences, priorities and grievances."⁹

None of the big parties are real parties with serious platforms. "Party platforms are prepared mainly for submission to the Commission on Elections... They are not meant to be a guide to the political education of the electorate, nor to govern the conduct of those elected to public office under party emblems."¹⁰ The political

9. Rodolfo Severino, "Summary, Conclusions, and Additional Thoughts," in *Whither the Philippines in the 21st Century?*, eds. Rodolfo Severino and Lorraine Salazar (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), 336.

10. David, "Political Parties in the Philippines," 171.

parties are neither inspiring nor persuasive, for they “are for the most part only loose coalitions of self-centered individuals and groups without any strong binding force or program to which they are committed.”¹¹

For believers in inclusive democracy, it is imperative to strengthen Philippine political parties so they can do better in the following: (1) promoting a clear political vision and coherent policies that persuade and inspire the citizenry, (2) providing a system and context for the theoretical and practical training of current and future political leaders, and (3) raising campaign funds with efficiency, transparency, and accountability.

As long as political parties in our country are not truly ideological and platform-based and they remain weak in terms of party discipline, structure, and campaign resource mobilization, we should not be surprised that political families and clans continue to constitute the primary source of financial and political wings of current and future elective officials. Also, the political clans continue to offer the primary training ground and launching pad for political leadership.

The parties ought to prioritize the enactment of a Political Party Development Law in the 15th Congress (2010-2013). Among the major features of the proposed law, based on bills filed in the 14th Congress, are the following: the creation of “a State Subsidy Fund for both party development and campaign financing,” the requirement of full disclosure and the establishment of a monitoring system in the use of the Subsidy Fund, the requirement of an established participatory process for selecting the candidates of an accredited party, and the punishment of party-switching or political *turncoatism*.¹²

The political parties have weak party discipline, and this weakness has roots in the history of successful party-switching by presidential candidates. The late Presidents Ramon Magsaysay (1953-1957) and Ferdinand Marcos (1965-1986) won after they switched parties to

11. John Carroll, “Democracy from below?” in *Engaging Society: The Sociologist in a War Zone* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2006), 158.

12. Ramon Casiple, “Philippine Political Party Reform: Reality and Concrete Action,” unpublished paper, Institute for Political and Electoral Reform, 2008, 2-4.

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challenge the incumbent presidents who were running for re-election.¹³ Fidel Ramos (1992-1998) participated in the party convention of the *Laban ng Demokratikong Pilipino* (LDP), the biggest party in 1991, to offer himself as its presidential candidate, but when he was not chosen, he left and formed his own party, Lakas-NUCD (National Union of Christian Democrats), with which he won.

This history partly explains the high plurality of Filipinos (49%) who are neutral or indifferent to the practice of party-switching and turncoatism, according to a 2006 Social Weather Stations (SWS) survey on political parties whose English and Filipino questions I helped formulate.

The nationwide survey was conducted on 24-29 November 2006.¹⁴ The survey respondents were 1,200 voting-age adults divided equally among four major study areas: the National Capital Region (NCR), Balance Luzon (outside NCR), the Visayas, and Mindanao. The survey has a margin of error of +/- 3% for the entire country. Some of the conclusions that can be drawn from this survey are the following:

Politicians and their parties have insufficiently informed, inspired, and persuaded the citizenry about their party visions, ideologies, platforms, and accomplishments. This partly explains the low percentage of Filipinos who are party-leaning (27%) or who think that some party “truly promotes their welfare.”

It is probable that insufficient party discipline and the propensity of many politicians to switch parties lessen party ability to persuade and inspire citizens to support party visions and policies, but in turn the high plurality of citizens (49%) who are neutral or indifferent to party-switching does not encourage political leaders to strengthen party discipline.

There is a significant minority (35%) of Filipinos who think that party-switching is usually or always bad, and most of those who hold this negative opinion agree that the political turncoat should be punished by removal from his/her elective post.

13. Nelson Navarro, *What's Happening to Our Country? The Life and Times of Emmanuel Pelaez* (Makati City: Emmanuel Pelaez Foundation, 2008), 113-115, 215-220.

14. 2006 Social Weather Stations (SWS), *Survey on Philippine Political Parties*, in <http://www.sws.org.ph> (accessed August 20, 2009).

Political parties should take to heart the survey findings that show that the most preferred reason for joining or becoming a member of a party is the “opportunity to learn more about politics” (35%). The next preferred reasons for joining are the following: 28% want to participate in selecting party candidates for national offices; 24% want to participate in selecting party candidates for local offices; 19% want to have access to politicians; 13% want to participate in formulating the party programs. In this light, parties ought to organize more educational and recruitment activities in which they articulate and explain their political visions, ideologies, and policies.

Political parties ought to prioritize political education and mass membership, as only 5% of Filipino adults (around 2.4 million) consider themselves party members, while there are 27% of Filipinos (around 13.6 million) who can be regarded as party-leaning or who do not think that all political parties are worthless to them.

The priorities ought to include also the completion of a Political Party Development Law that would create a State Subsidy Fund for party development and campaign financing, require an established participatory process for selecting party candidates, and punish party-switching.

Ecclesial encouragement for lay people to participate actively in principled partisan politics should target the strengthening of institutions like the political party system. Political parties that are ideologically strong, dialogical, and financially stable will likely be more effective in political education than the institutional church.

In this light, here are some crucial pastoral actions for the institutional church if it wants to be more effective in evangelizing politics:

(1) Educate or encourage voters to support a Party Development Law that would create a State Subsidy Fund for party development and campaign financing, require an established participatory process for selecting party candidates, and punish party-switching.

(2) Encourage voters to review the platforms, programs and accomplishments of current parties, and to join a party and actively contribute to its capability in formulating and implementing its programs and disciplining its members.

(3) Specify and disseminate criteria to guide voters in assessing and choosing to join a political party, e.g. the coherence, the

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explanatory ability, and the explicit and implicit anthropological assumptions of the party ideology and governance platform.

While faith without deeds is dead (James 2:20), faith without ideology is not necessarily so. At the same time, the practice of faith without ideology tends either to neglect social reform or to pursue reform in incoherent or unsystematic ways. Thus, in the evangelization of politics, we should take into account the real presence, absence, weakness, and strength of ideologies in society, and help address the institutional weakness of political parties, which are ideologically and financially weak.

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