

Holistic Mission in the Context of Asian Plurality

Rex Resurrection B. Reyes, Jr.¹

The theme of the 22nd General Convention of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) in November 2007 was “Weaving the Patchwork of Justice and Peace in a Broken World.” Inspired by Isaiah 32:15-20, the outgoing NCCP General Secretary, Sharon Rose Joy Ruiz Duremdes, expounded thus:

Ours is a broken world. Splits. . . gaps. . . cracks. . . chasms. These describe our world. The divide cuts across race, culture, age, class, gender; churches even. The penchant for power and superiority feed the human proclivity for dissension and argument. The propensity to dominate and control diminishes the possibility of finding a common ground upon which we all can stand even as we work together for justice and peace. . . Brokenness abounds. . . because of the perspective that leads to individualistic and anti-collective attitudes. The dominant economic system exacerbates this position, prodding people to look out for no one else but themselves.

This gathering takes place at a time when this country is in deep crisis—morally, economically and, if I may say so, spiritually. I must hasten to add that the last one does not mean that we Filipinos are devoid of any spirituality. Meanwhile, may I assume that part of the reason my country was chosen as a venue for this conference is because of prevailing conditions here and its challenges to God’s mission. If so then I most heartily implore you to look at this conference also as a pastoral visit in solidarity with your sisters and brothers in the Philippines. We shall be forever grateful to you.

Let me paint an overview of the mission landscape in the Philippines. And even as I do, I urge you to think back home and draw some parallelism of our common experiences.

Political, Economic and Moral Crisis in the Philippines

We are 86 million Filipinos with an average of 3,000 Filipino men and women leaving the country everyday for work abroad. That number is only the government estimate. It does not include the hundreds of others who leave through some other means. The toll of this forced migration of many young parents on the Filipino family is devastating. I will not bore you with statistics, but the flight of Filipinos abroad at such great risk is simply an act of desperation. At the same time, we are experiencing the heavy influx of Koreans in many parts of our country for a variety of reasons. The influx of Koreans for business and religious intentions has had its negative effects. At once this is a concern of mission.

Around 50% of our population does not trust the current President of our country. That

¹ The Rev. Fr. Rex Resurrection B. Reyes, Jr. is the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines. This speech was the keynote address at the opening of the consultation-dialogue on “Holistic Mission in the Context of Asian Plurality” organized by the Christian Conference of Asia at the UCCP Shalom Center, Manila, Philippines on 24-29 March 2008.

is according to the latest survey by Pulse Asia. Why has our government become so unpopular?

First, Mrs. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (the President of the Philippines) continues to assure us that her macroeconomic fundamentals are effective and that this country is economically stable. Yet, it does not take an economist to know that we are facing the worst records in terms of joblessness and poverty. She talks about a progressive Philippines in terms of gross domestic product and then proceeds to talk about the "poorest of the poor". She is more accurate in the latter than in the former. She talks about a strong Philippine currency but fails to mention the fact that the true reason for that is the weakening of the US dollar. There is an impending shortage of rice, but she and her spin-masters insist that there is no shortage. In fact the Secretary of Agriculture wonders about the shortage as, he says, he does not see long lines in the rice market. Of course, the other side of it is that the price of rice increased tremendously beyond the reach of ordinary people whose budgets are already stretched to the limit. The government says the increase is the result of rice shortage all over the region as a result of nature. Why would nature be blamed for food shortage? In reality, only the dollar remittances of our overseas Filipino workers and the income from state assets that were sold have kept the Philippine economy afloat. Most certainly, not the strong macroeconomic fundamentals that the President constantly brags about. In simple terms, her macroeconomics is all about being dependent on foreign loans, privatization, deregulation and foreign investments fundamentals that meant more suffering for the Filipino people.

Second, what Mrs. Arroyo says about a strong economy is a propaganda offensive to cover her waning political credibility. The legitimacy of her presidency continues to hound her since the last presidential elections where election results were rigged in her favor. A Congress controlled by her political party threw out the impeachment case against her. Last January, she said she would rather forget EDSA II, the people's power that brought down President Estrada and installed her to the presidency in 2001. She may forget that but the people will not forget the promises she made then and how she has failed to fulfill any one of those promises.

Third, corruption in government has worsened. The scandal after scandal that characterizes her presidency involving her and her husband, the military and other government agencies and which involves mind-boggling billions of US dollars is the final straw that has led people back to the streets demanding truth and accountability. There is now a groundswell for her to step down. What is so noticeable about the current upheaval is that now it is the young people who are taking the lead in calling for genuine change.

The war against terrorism a tool for state repression

Faced with legitimate dissent, the President unleashed the vicious might of her position. She banned rallies and demonstrations. She banned cabinet officials and military officers from attending Senate hearings. She signed a law declaring a state of emergency. She ordered the military to find ways and means to define matters of "state security." She gave out huge amounts of cash to local government officials placed in a bag as an envelope was not big enough to contain it. Money was even given to Roman Catholic bishops during

one of their plenary meetings. And she ensured her control over Congress.

On top of these she has signed into law a draconian measure called the Human Security Act (HSA), which is nothing more than an attempt to quell any act of dissent. It defines terrorism by enumeration. The HSA legitimizes the extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances that stood at 887 people and 185 people, respectively, by the end of 2007. The victims included local officials, journalists, lawyers, priests and pastors, students and indigenous peoples.

Left with no other recourse, human rights defenders and peace advocates turned to the international community. The National Council of Churches in the Philippines joined the initiative and released its report, *Let the Stones Cry Out: An Ecumenical Report on Human Rights in the Philippines and a Call to Action*, and sent a delegation called the Ecumenical Voice to North America and to the United Nations, both in New York and Geneva, to submit the report and support the other human rights organizations in placing before the world their testimony of the state of human rights in the Philippines. If at all, the Supreme Court of the land has taken notice of horrible human rights situation and has at last shown its intention to become truly the vanguard of social justice. But this is largely due to the effort of the Chief Justice himself. The Secretary of the Department of Justice is another story.

Government's reaction to visits by international partners of the NCCP and special rapporteurs of the United Nations was defensive. The agencies created by the President to investigate these killings were merely for damage control as they suffered credibility problems and partiality. We have yet to see the prosecution of the perpetrators of the human rights abuses.

Finally, the President has stated several times that she wants the revolutionary movement in this country quashed by the end of her term in 2010. Towards this end, she has not made any moves towards peace negotiations but has been on a war footing. She has also continued to draw her sword of war in Muslim-Mindanao, this time with the aid of the U.S. military, under the guise of the so-called "Balikatan Exercises". There is reason to believe that US military servicemen and women are here to stay. At the surface it is all in the name of the war against terrorism. The ecumenical movement holds on to the call that unless the causes of the unrest are faced up squarely (e.g. poverty, corruption, landlessness) we will never experience genuine peace and justice in this country.

Perspectives

How can people worship in spirit and in truth in a situation of economic depravity, corruption and the misuse and abuse of political power? How can God's mission be done in a situation where the government decides who is to live and who is to die, who is to disappear and who is to re-appear? How can God's mission prosper in a situation where the nation's sovereignty and patrimony are threatened and the citizens who rush to its defense are called a noisy bunch of activists, communists or leftists, and now terrorists and, therefore, targets for arrests, detention and even assassination? How do you even begin to define mission in a situation where Christian leaders have discordant voices on

issues that matter most in life? Do we even have to redefine mission or do we merely need to affirm mission in the way Jesus lived on this earth?

Plurality according to the Webster's Dictionary is "the existence within a society of groups that differ in ethnic origins, cultural patterns. . . etc. . ." Of all the peoples in the world, we in Asia are the most glaring example of plurality, even if we take Southeast Asia alone. Another term analogous to plurality is diversity. St. Paul also used these two terms by identifying them closely with the variety of gifts. If this be the case, plurality must be a grace of God—one of God's greatest gifts. As a gift, plurality is to enhance life and not to destroy life. Thus, injustice and un-peace are not part of plurality.

In the countries where we come from, there is a need to heed what some have called the "spiritual resistance for life" as a way of doing mission in our context.

We must move our dialogue further beyond and take a serious look at the people's issues, their struggle against the demonic and not against "flesh and blood but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph 6.12). For we see that here in Asia, we have for so long become the battle field for the greedy and have suffered deprivation amidst the abundance of God's providence in order that those from another part of the world will enjoy our resources to the full. To focus on the people's issues of peace and justice is to unite, amidst our diversity, in order to stop the advance of the hegemonic desire of the Empire.

To focus on the people's issues is to reverse the traditional understanding of mission of bringing the people into the church, or conversion; and to encourage the people instead to go out of the churches and into the world that the liberating message of the Gospel may be cast and sown, in true fidelity to Christ who did not wait for people but sought them out.

To focus on the people's issues is to look at mission as affirming the biblical notion of ensuring the future of generations through the defense of land and patrimony from the onslaught of capital greed, corruption and consumerism.

To focus on the people's issues is to look at mission as affirming the biblical notion of the dignity of all human beings where there is neither Jew nor Greek as against the upsurge of religious intolerance and attempts to demonize each other.

To focus on the people's issues is to look at mission as affirming and strengthening the sense of community and communion against the onslaught of individualism, selfishness and the obsession for war. Mission then is to engage all others to dig deep into their respective faith reserves and to be overshadowed by the overwhelming desire for harmony. That community is inclusive, plurality notwithstanding. It is the only way towards building up the body of Christ.