

Our Time For Confessing in the Philippines-The People Power Revolt

Colleagues,

I can no longer remember how Bob Bertram and I learned about Francisco F. Claver, Roman Catholic bishop from the Philippines. Somehow we'd heard of him as a major player in the church and state conflict of the Marcos regime. Then one day during Seminex years [1974-83] he showed up at St. Louis University visiting his fellow Jesuits. Bob and I got invited to join the conversation. A friendship arose—and correspondence too. Also a couple face-to-face visits in Manila, which he refers to below, one of them with a bunch of Seminex students. Marie and I had another one—in Addis Ababa, of all places—when we were mission volunteers there (1995) and he was passing through. “I’m here in Addis,” he said on the phone. “Come on over for breakfast at the Jesuit house.” So we did. Claver, now retired and approaching his 80th birthday, was not only a major figure in the People Power movement against Marcos, but also a major voice (and actor) in the Philippine “confessing movement” in the Roman church. So Claver now shows up as prime confessor in chapter six of Bob’s book, “A Time for Confessing.” Bob titles the chapter: “A Philippine Revolution: From Patients to Agents.”

I asked Claver to do a review. He said yes. What he has now sent for ThTh posting is “sortuv a review” in, with, and under a confession of his own from that era. For more information on Claver’s wide-ranging life’s work—for half of which (40 years) he’s been a bishop—google his name.

Peace and joy!

OUR TIME FOR CONFESSING IN THE PHILIPPINES-THE PEOPLE POWER REVOLT

[After reading Bob Bertram's "A Time for Confessing" and what he wrote about our confessing here in the Philippines during the "People Power Revolution" of 1986, I must admit it had never occurred to me to put our revolution on the same footing as Martin Luther's revolt back in the sixteenth century. But the more I thought of it, the more I saw Bob was right. But later I also realized that all the other cases he cites of confessing were, read from our experience in the Philippines, akin to the "faith/ideology" problematic that had led us, in the first place, to the People Power overthrow of a dictatorial government.

That's when I decided not to do the review that I was thinking of doing on Ed Schroeder's request. Instead I would share something I'd already written on the problem of faith and ideology and how it influenced the development of the non-violent revolt of 1986. I'm reproducing here a short section of a book that Orbis Books will be putting out this Fall under the title "the Making of a Local Church". I think it is as good a summary too, put in different terms, of Bob's main thesis. Or am I sorely misreading him?

He (and Ed Schroeder) visited in Manila with a group of Seminex theological students in 1984, and again very briefly in 1988, and both times we had conversations that lead me to believe I am right in the conclusion I make here, to wit, that he would

agree with me in placing what he wrote under the same category of “faith and ideology” that I use here.

“Salvo meliore iudicio,” I dare to say, “stat thesis.” [Pending better judgment, my thesis stands]

Faith and Ideology

Marcos’ New Society was a grandiose scheme to make Filipinos better than they were, to reform them and transform them into a strong nation. If that scheme was a mode of change by fiat, by force, and according to a blueprint that was wholly his, a way of social reform in the making and formulation of which there was no participation whatsoever by us who were to be changed, these little facts vitiated it from its very conception. But that wasn’t the worst thing about his New Society. Non-participation and coercion are bad enough. But when they mean accepting something evil, something that was destructive of us as a people? That evil was a military dictatorship the only purpose of which was to sustain and keep Marcos and his coterie of supporters in power and to enable them to enrich themselves by all sorts of corrupt means. We in the Church had all the right-and obligation-to call it and treat it as un-Christian.

Something happened in 1976 that brought us to a deeper-and quite contentious-examination of how social change should be brought about. Canon Francois Houtart of Louvain University in Belgium conducted a month-long seminar in Baguio on “structural analysis” for social action workers in the Church. (He had already done so in a number of countries of Latin America and South Asia.) It was a way of analyzing social situations in all their dimensions: political, economic, cultural (although I would question the adequacy of what he called “cultural”) , religious. Coming at a time when we were at a loss on how to

face up to the dictatorship in any significant way, it became very popular among social activists in and out of the Church.

Houtart's structural analysis was readily accepted by the Left, widely propagated by them, as it tallied perfectly with the ideology of change of the NDF (National Democratic Front-a Communist coalition) and the revolutionary aims of the NPA (New People's Army-the Communist Party's armed group). Houtart himself had made no bones about its Marxist orientation. This generated within Church ranks what later was called "the faith-ideology debate". And in essence it was a debate about how to bring change into society in ways that were more expressly Christian and not merely ideological.

Marcos' ideology was rightist to the core, capitalistic in the worst sense, totally geared towards selfish ends: his staying on in power and, as it turned out, for profit. Against him was the Left in its various permutations: its governing body, the CPP (Communist Party of the Philippines); its armed component, the NPA; its political arm, the NDF. Allied with them was the CNL (Christians for National Liberation), ecumenical in composition, made up mostly of priests, religious, pastors and lay activists from the various Churches. They had their own blueprint of what the ideal society should be-unabashedly couched in Marxist jargon and supportive of its ideology. Thus they made no bones about the aim of their armed struggle: the setting up of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This was supposed to replace the current dictatorship of the "burgis" (the bourgeoisie, in Marx' vocabulary), the elite classes of Philippine society which they claimed was fully supported by "clerico-fascist reactionaries" in the Church. One dictatorship was to be replaced by another: by peaceful, above-ground, parliamentary means, if at all possible; but also and simultaneously, by un-peaceful means, anti-government, underground, violent. In time violence was being touted as the

only way of righting the wrongs of Philippine society as Marcos' military rule got more and more oppressive.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, it had become common to analyze Philippine society as Right, Left and Center in these terms: Right was Marcos and his supporters; Left, the Communists and their various allies; and Center, the largely undifferentiated middle that had problems with either extreme but was not organized in any meaningful way (except perhaps for the Social Democrats, a political group, left of center, that the NDF considered its rival but was not as widely spread). The situation changed with the assassination of Ninoy Aquino in 1983. It was then that the Center started to come together in some organized way. Being against the violence of either extreme, the middle groups began to coalesce in their acceptance of ANV-active non-violence-as their mode of facing up to the problems wrought on the country by Marcos' long dictatorship. (It was at this time too that John Goss and Hildegarde Meyer, a husband and wife team who were on a world-wide crusade pushing ANV as a way of social reform, came to the Philippines and helped not a little to crystallize the efforts of the Center.)

The faith-ideology debate mentioned above arose from the dilemma posed by the two extremes. And the question Church people had to find an answer to: Given the need for change in society then, did one have to have a definite blueprint for reform of society in order to be able to act in a meaningful way for change? And for that blueprinting, was it absolutely necessary to have a fully developed ideology? Or was it enough to go by the general notions of good and evil from one's faith perspective on things? If one did not go along with the two extremes, and one thought faith imperatives were not particular enough, what ideology should be developed? These were the bothersome questions for a good number of people of good will

in the nebulous Center who could accept neither the Marcos regime nor his Marxist enemies.

In the murderous confrontation between Liberal Capitalism and Marxist Socialism, localized in the armed conflict between Marcos and the NDF-NPA, the questions soon came down to asking whether there was a Third Way between the two extremes. We knew from contacts with Latin Americans as well as other Asians that it wasn't only in the Philippines that this question was being asked. In other parts of the world, the same question was being raised under conditions of the Cold War; and certainly among Church people in countries where Houtart's and similar ways of structural analysis had become popular.

The Third Way: Critical Collaboration

We had an answer of sorts to the question which we never realized was THE answer until later. And it ran along these lines: It did not matter what one's particular ideology or program for change was-there are any number of ways of reform, each with its own special strengths (and weaknesses), none able to claim acceptance by all; but whatever ideology one believed was best, it had to be infused thoroughly by faith, modified by it, if modification was needed, motivated by its values, strengthened by them, developed under their guidance. In effect we were saying: Choose either extreme (there was no choice if one or the other prevailed in the nation?), but let your faith correct whatever was unacceptable in the ideology you choose (or suffer from if the choice is not yours to make?) and in the manner of its implementation. If this approach was ever thought of, it was because of the way religion was being blatantly instrumentalized by both political groups for THEIR ends. In this instrumentalizing, it wasn't faith that corrected and guided ideology but the other way around.

In time the approach became more and more the Center's-of many of the more involved ones, at least-in their rejecting of what were seen to be unacceptable in the reform blueprints of the two extremes and the embracing of the good that they stood for or tried to bring about. This approach was expressed in the term "critical collaboration". It was the stance taken by the AMRSP (Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines) in the early years of Martial Law and later adopted and pushed by Cardinal Sin to whom authorship of the term has been wrongly attributed. In effect they were saying:

We collaborate with the good the New Society stands for and implements honestly by way of reform, always in a critical way; but by the same token, we don't accept what we see is wrong in the formulation and execution of its reforms, again, always in a critical way.

The emphasis was on critical, not so much on collaboration. The other side of the coin was "critical opposition" to what was wrong. As martial law progressed and with it the armed rebellion of the Left, the stance of critical collaboration/opposition had also to be applied to the latter. This stance was thus saying:

We are with the Left in its efforts to better the life condition of what its champions in the Church call the PDO-the poor, deprived and oppressed-of Philippine society. But also and always in a critical way. Hence we do not accept the way of violence that they keep insisting is the only way we can correct what is happening under the military regime of Marcos.

The "philosophy" of critical collaboration with all the forces for good within any ideological group, even though fraught with

all kinds of problems, was the soul of simplicity and common sense: Maximize the good, minimize the bad. It was an approach, we realized, that could be used under any system of government one lived in, whether capitalistic, Communistic, tribal, monarchic-even ecclesiastic!

[“Critical collaboration/opposition”-this was to be done using the values of faith as our criteria for embracing one or the other ideology we were confronted with at the time, Marcos’s brand of capitalism or Marx’s version of socialism. One aspect of the ideological dilemma that bothered many of us, strangely enough, was the language being used by the Left about the part faith played as far as their ideological position was concerned. They spoke of a “faith dimension” in their program of social change added to the economic, political, and social dimensions. (The Right seemed unbothered by how they were to put their faith and their choice into one.) That kind of language said much about our difference with them. For to us it meant we first choose our political, economic, and social program of reform (i.e., a full-blown ideology) and then slap on our faith to it as just one more dimension. In practice this was to instrumentalize the faith, to use it to justify one’s prior choice of an ideology or system of change. Many of us in the Center would thus rather talk of a “perspective of faith”. It simply meant that whatever program of reform we make use of, every aspect of it must be examined under the light of faith, keeping what is in conformity with faith values, minimizing or rejecting what is not.

The following anecdote, included in the book I alluded to above, is worth quoting for it illustrates well what we meant by “the perspective of faith”. It also shows how the faith/ideology debate had reached the grassroots levels of Church in our BECs (basic ecclesial communities) and how our people were reflecting deeply and critically in their own way

about what their faith meant even for their politics.]

I was giving a day of recollection to some leaders of our indigenous people and after the very first talk, one of them asked: "Why is it that the ideology that the Marxists are pushing is so attractive? What about us Christians? Don't we have an ideology too, and if we do, why doesn't it grab us the way the Marxist one does?" I didn't answer the question directly-I confess I had never thought of the question in the way he put it. Instead I suggested that it be made an additional point to ponder in the reflections and discussions the participants would be having as part of their day of recollection. They did just that, and at the end of the day, the same person who asked the question summarized the group's thinking this way:"We Christians have our faith to guide us in the decisions we take for our life. It is not an ideology in the sense of the Marxist one. The Marxist ideology is most attractive because it is very clear. Its followers have no qualms about the means they use. So long as the means they choose insure the attainment of their ends, they make use of them, no consideration given to whether they are morally good or bad. That is not true with us Christians. At every step we take, we have to pause and ask if what we decide to do is according to our faith's demands for moral action or not. This way things are not too clear. But that's what the life of faith is all about. Faith is a light that we have to make shine on our life to find out which way is God's way. And often we just have to walk through darkness."

I was flabbergasted-and humbled-by the summing up made by the man. And not just by the wisdom shown but much more by the depth of his and his companions' faith.

[That tribesman's summary of the results of the discerning

process he and his group went through was, in my book, an act of authentic confessing, all the more so in that it was the result of prayerful discernment by a small community of professed believers to whom faith was not just a set of beliefs but an inner force and light for thought and action, for life itself.]

Francisco F. Claver, S.J.

San Jose Seminary

Loyola Heights

Quezon City

June 27, 2008