

(EMBARGO, March 14, 2008 .)

TOWARDS A MORALLY REBUILT NATION

(Pastoral Statement of the Archbishop, Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Province of Manila composed of the Archdiocese of Manila, the Dioceses of Antipolo, Caloocan, Cubao, Imus, Malolos, Novaliches, Parañaque, Pasig, San Pablo, the Apostolic Vicariates of Puerto Princesa and Taytay, and the Military Ordinariate.)

Today we are experiencing a social and political mess. This however goes beyond the question of truth to the search for probity. Probity is about the integrity of all, the accuser and the accused. We are unhappy and we feel betrayed. And yet as Pope Benedict XVI reminds us “in spite of our great disappointment our great hope can only be God who has loved us and continues to love us to the end, until all is accomplished”, (*Spe Salvi*, 27). We also know that together we have the capacity to correct and purify the nation by starting with ourselves.

The Model for Change is the Desert.

The history of salvation teaches us that the long road to freedom inevitably passes through the desert of purification and conversion. Having escaped from Pharaoh, via the miraculous crossing through the Sea of Reeds, the Israelites considered themselves liberated. But they were not yet free, because they wanted to go back to their old ways in Egypt. “Should we not do better to go back to Egypt?” (*Numbers 14:2-3*).

The chosen people hesitated at the shores of the Sea and remained enslaved. So Moses led Israel away from the Sea of Reeds, and they entered the desert of Shur. (*Exodus 15:22*) Believing that Pharaoh was the idolater refusing them the worship of the true God, it was in the wilderness where the people discovered that they too were guilty worshipers of golden idols. (*Exodus 32:1-29*). People were disciplined and converted from their greed (*Exodus: 17-21*); and the desert which the Israelites feared to enter became for them a place of purification, discipline and conversion, before they could enter the promised land of freedom, forty years later. There are yet no proven easy short cuts to conversion and renewal.

Looking back at EDSA I, euphoric and heroic as it was, it appeared that the event became the Filipinos’ day of crossing to freedom; but that was only the first step that hardly anyone knew. The “desert” awaited the people who would be purified and converted, before they become fully liberated. But people preferred the convenient streets as the easier route to an imagined freedom, and feared that the “desert experience” that awaited conversion and new beginnings.

Corruption as the cancer of the nation.

We cannot add more to the wrath of God for lies, untruth, injustice and evil. Conscience, as the voice of God within, already tells us what good there is to pursue and what evil to avoid. Our people are known to be God-fearing and God-loving; sadly, they fight, deceive and kill for money.

Shamefully, we have been known to be a nation whose prime industry has been identified as politics simply because politics is the main route to power, which in turn, is the main route to wealth **(1)**. In this country people use politics to get money, and more politics to protect more money. “Corruption radically distorts the role of representative institutions, because they become an arena for political bartering between clients’ requests and governmental services. In this way political choices favor the narrow objectives of those who possess the means to influence these choices and are an obstacle to bringing the common good of all citizens.” (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 411).

The subordination of the public good to individual or group interests is what corruption is all about. In whatever form it takes, the practice of corruption is both immoral and unjust. Corruption is worse than lies, because lies are employed only to cover it. Whenever Government money is stolen or whenever supplier or contractors’ money is offered as bribe to secure projects, to the disadvantage of the Government graft or corruption is committed. Graft is the acquisition of gain by dishonest, unfair and sordid means through the abuse of one’s position in politics, business, etc., while corruption is the improper enrichment of politicians or civil servants or those close to them by misuse of public power entrusted to them. [*BIR, Revenue Memo Circular 12-2005*]. As an injustice to the Government and people, graft and corruption are against the Seventh Commandment and have the added element of betraying one’s country.

The Universal and All-time Application of the Seventh Commandment.

The Seventh Commandment, “Thou shall not steal”, applies to all, as individuals or as groups. Thus, if one holds on to money or its equivalent that is not his or hers (or theirs), justice demands **restitution** of the stolen or bribe money to the owner. (*CCC, 1459*). If the owner can no longer be located, then the money should be given to the poor, or to a credible institution that will give the money for the poor or give true services for the poor.

Restitution was the constant teaching in relation to the violation of the Seventh Commandment in the Bible. “If anyone steals...he will pay back.” (*Exodus 21:37*).

“Look Lord, I am going to give half my property to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody I will pay him back four times the amount.” With this confession, the Lord Jesus blessed Zacchaeus with salvation. (*Luke 19:8-10*). The teaching of the Church on stealing is this: **No Restitution, no Absolution. In the words of Jesus: with Restitution, there is Salvation. (Luke 19:9). An authentic conversion demands willingness to restore what has been stolen and the resolve not to steal again.**

The penitent should not be so complacent about one's faith as to consider oneself truly absolved before God on account of faith alone, even if one has no contrition...For faith without penance would effect no remission of sins. (*Council of Trent*).

The mandate of the Seventh Commandment is also addressed to traders and ordinary citizens in all practices of business, commerce and trading. Fraud in business, over pricing, bribery in contracts, cheating in scales, cheating in legitimate taxes and the smuggling of taxable goods, including also the smuggling and trafficking of substances for abuse to damn the innocent and the weak members of society, etc. --- all these are among the many forms of violating the Seventh Commandment.

Our Response: Our desert experience.

The old and the young, from kindergarten through high school on to the tertiary level of education till up to the licensure exams, are all to be formed and guided towards integrity, trained never to cheat in studies and exams. The “**discipline of the desert**” is to be taught and applied, if anyone is to succeed at any level towards “the fullness of life.”

The Seventh Commandment covers not only the present corruption deals that have been recently exposed, but also all deals, at all levels of government service, of all administrations and governance, no matter what came out of the past or will come out of the present or future inquiries. “Thou shalt not steal” covers also all trading of even ordinary citizens.

We suddenly noticed that the widespread corruption we see in others is also the corruption we detect in ourselves.

Corrupt practices and fraud prevailed in the cities, towns and even in small Barangays. In the last two generations there had been tens of thousands of graft-ridden contracts in Government, the biggest single controversial project ever recorded in the Philippine history was the Westinghouse's Bataan Nuclear Plant (2).

True liberation would mean that we enter our desert of repentance and conversion. Change lies only at the heart of every person. Let us begin there.

Values for living justly will be preached in parishes, prayed for in the homes, re-taught in schools, discussed in small communities and groups. Support structures will be required for a righteous life and fair dealings. After our personal and communal “desert” conversion, we will, please God, be ushered to the freedom we seek.

God's Help is always needed.

We need God's grace, if we are to encourage one another, forgive each other, pay our debts to the justice that we all violated, and start again, not at the banks of “our Sea of Reeds”, but beyond the streets of EDSA. Believers and lovers of God, like true Christians do not have to hate, destroy each other even if they want to correct the

mistakes of the past or the present and of each other. Many are critical of the present governance particularly in the areas of truth and justice. But we can restore truth and justice without restoring to violence and hatred. A nation built on contempt is completely unimaginable. As pastors we cannot tell you less, even if some will resent the way we teach. It is for everybody's good, especially the very poor among our brothers and sisters that we now address this call for communal renewal.

We need the leaders from the highest to the lowest and their families not only to lead us, but also to give us examples of repentance and true humble conversion. We also need people with other ideas but with positive emotions in nation building. Given the example and encouragement, the citizens will be inspired to follow where in the past they hesitated to proceed --- to their "desert" transformation.

Ngayon diretso na tayo sa hindi natin kaagad gustong puntahan --- sa Disyerto ng ating mga masamang karanasan at kasalanan na dapat nating baguhin! May Pag-asa ppo ang ating Bayan at ang ating sarili. Basta't sa pagbabago kay Kristo Hesus tayo ay magsama sama.

In prayer let us beg Mary and Joseph to lead us back to the Christ that we had lost in the past! God bless us all!

+GAUDENCIO B. CARDINAL ROSALES

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Palm Sunday, March 16, 2008

- (1) Samuel Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies, p. 67.**
- (2) Ricardo Manapat, Some are Smarter than Others, (\$1.9B in 1981 to \$2B in 1982), pp.324-328; 341.**