

PREFACE

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“The globalized world of today needs badly the voice of theology... Theology is not only a noble task, it is a priority in our globalized world. It is along this line that I welcome you, theologians, to our local Church.”

With these words the Bishop of Tagbilaran, Leonardo Medroso, JCD, welcomed the members of the *Damdaming Katoliko sa Teolohiya* or DaKaTeo¹ (Catholic Theological Society of the Philippines) and their invited guests to the island of Panglao, Bohol, Philippines for their fifth annual conference from 23-25 October 2009 with the theme, “Politics and the Christian Tradition”.

The theological conversation focused on at least five dimensions of the theme. As regards methodology, the participants searched for ways Christians can envision the relationship between politics and the Christian tradition, and explored forms of engagements that may be appropriate in the Philippine context. From the vantage of history, the participants inquired on how the relationship is being played out in the unfolding of Philippine history, analyzing the various forms of political options and engagements, examining the conjunctures of diverse factors, and identifying protagonists and victims. Theological concerns were also discussed in a systematic

1. This collection of essays is a fruit of the 2009 conference of the *Damdaming Katoliko sa Teolohiya* (DaKaTeo), an association of Catholic theologians in the Philippines which promotes theologies for a just and inclusive Church and society. DaKaTeo (a) supports creative and scholarly theological research and its dissemination, (b) promotes theological reflection and discussion on current issues and questions in society, and (c) fosters fellowship among its members and solidarity with the oppressed and excluded.

Preface

fashion, focusing on the implications these diverse engagements have on the Philippine church's understanding of its mission and identity. The lively discussions identified moral challenges and ethical issues, many of which are structural and systemic in nature while others are personal and communal in character, and waded on morally viable trajectories and/or liberative directions. From a pastoral vantage, the conversation reflected on how the diverse ways of relating politics and Christian tradition impinge on the pastoral role of the church, particularly in terms of pastoral praxis and strategies, social carriers and agents, assumptions and paradigms, beneficiaries and victims, as well as institutional agenda and interests.

Much of the contextualization of the very lively discussions during the conference owes a great deal from one of the invited guests, Edicio de la Torre. Entitled "Between Honesty and Hope", his personal and animated sharing of his forty years, more or less, of political engagement not only transported everyone back to the unfolding of events that shaped the interaction of politics and the Christian tradition in our country from the mid-1960s to the present, but also highlighted the theological questions and answers that emerged. According to his framework, the years from 1965 to 1972 were mainly a period of intense "self-questioning about the impact of Christianity on Philippine society and culture". The period saw a church in search of a "Filipino theology" and one that was split over the debate on productivity versus justice, social development versus preferential option for the poor, and reform versus revolution. These were the years when the "messages of the rising revolutionary movement" had "appeal to those longing for change" in contrast to "elite intransigence and the limitations of reform strategies". There were attempts to chart a "middle way" as much as there were "initial attempts at a theological justification for a radical political option".

As the dominant context in Philippine society shifted into systematic and institutionalized repression, the years from 1972 to 1986 saw the birth of a "theology of struggle". Aware and convinced of the limitations of the "Theology of Social Reform", theological explorations challenged the church's official stance of "critical collaboration" with the Marcos regime and, borrowing the typology offered by Leonardo Boff, identified the intertwined roles of the professional, pastoral and popular for the desired radical changes.

Comparisons and contrasts with Latin America's liberation theology, South Korea's *Minjung* theology and South Africa's *Kairos* theology helped the Filipino church's theology of struggle deal with *quaestiones disputatae*, particularly on the issues of armed struggle, Marxist ideology and leadership, and the instrumentalization of the church.

The 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution and its aftermath were, according to De la Torre, equally a challenging period as Christians struggled for "interpretation (of the event) and direction". Despite the changes brought about by the said event, particularly the restoration of democratic institutions, the period from 1986 up to the present, is full of fundamental challenges and risks. These would include "recognizing structural limits" yet "pursuing conjunctural possibilities", shifting "from resistance to participation", "denouncing right-wing Christian politics but calling for conversion", "anticipating globalization and neo-liberal discourse", as well as the "decomposition and recomposition of parties and movements". The single thread that weaves all these together is, following the pattern of Mary's Magnificat, the renewal of our spirituality and strategy for justice nurtured by the preferential option for the poor. Hence, for De la Torre, "thinking, imagining, and acting" on behalf of justice are at present opportune and necessary at local, national, and global levels and conjunctures.

The present issue of Hapag bears witness to the fruits of the theological conversation. It is a collection of papers which, as DaKaTeo tradition has it, were first delivered and discussed during the conference or submitted as reading materials of the participants, and later expanded and improved in view of comments from peers and colleagues and also in light of the insights and lessons gained from the theological conversation.

The first paper revisits the problematic relationship of politics and religion in light of different models of thought. Written by Johan Verstraeten, a professor of the Faculty of Theology, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium), the paper argues that it is not enough "to acknowledge that religion plays again a significant role in politics" but more so "discern in what regards the re-entry of religion in the public sphere can be justified" and what would such mean "for a transformative presence of Christian churches or groups in the public sphere". To argue his case, Verstraeten dissects every model of thought

Preface

with regards to the relationship between religion and politics, and exposes their assumptions and pretensions.

He starts off with those that construe their separation (e.g., *civitas Dei* and *civitas terrena*, two-kingdom theory, and their modern variants) and their fusion (e.g., theocratic systems, their extreme or moderate forms, and the *status confessionis*), after which he critically explains the “tragic hero” model proposed by Max Weber that tries to bridge the gap between the two by simply anchoring it on the conscience of the politician. More importantly, the paper warns us of the ideological use of religion in support of the state whether in the form of “civil religion” or under the guise of a “public theology”, and also brings to our attention the inherent strengths and limitations of political theology and Christian democracy as well as liberation theology. In response to J. Casanova’s argument for a more active engagement of religion in civil society, Verstraeten’s paper argues for “a more complex approach” that moves beyond confining religion to be merely in the sphere of civil society. Such approach would make it possible for Christians to employ the *status confessionis* model as source of resistance in cases of systematic and massive crimes against humanity.

Theological reflection on the relationship of politics and the Christian tradition cannot eschew the person of the historical Jesus because, in light of the converging insights of modern scholarship, he was a political figure, Ramon Echica reminds us in the next essay. If politics broadly refers to public policy making processes then “Jesus undoubtedly had strong political views” which he expressed in words and deeds during his public ministry. The challenge however is, says Echica, the fact that many of our Filipino popular devotions give us an apolitical picture of Jesus. Echica’s paper responds to the challenge by presenting us how Jesus is seen by scholars of today and by evaluating the Catholic devotion to Santo Niño of Cebu. Echica contends that such devotion can be “a principal tool in linking Christian faith and its ethical dimensions” if it is able to appropriate the “solid results of historical research on the life of Jesus”.

Where J. Verstraeten argues for the necessity of Christian community for the generation and sustenance of critical political leadership both by movements and individual leaders, Dennis Gonzalez in the next paper rather emphasizes the urgency of strongly

institutionalized political parties as necessary institutions in strong democracies. The Church's advocacy for political education is fundamentally deficient because, according to Gonzalez, "the practice of democratic politics is not one of the core competencies of the hierarchical church." The call for conscience-formation is weak and the fight against corruption is flawed unless these are systematically sustained by political parties where political vision, values and principles are taught and practiced by current and future political leaders and members. To arrest this basic limitation in the Philippine polity, Gonzalez challenged the institutional church to advocate for the passage of a "Party Development Law". He proposes as well to shift political education from mere personal integrity and competence to platforms, programs and accomplishment of political parties, and offer a set of criteria that guide voters not only in elections but more so in choosing and becoming active members of political parties.

However, for the church to get involved by way of legislative agenda is always a complex matter. In his study on the official church's campaign against the passage of the Reproductive Health Bill (House Bill 5043), Eric Marcelo Genilo critically examines how some if not most of the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines have unnecessarily organized the Catholic fold to vote in the May 2010 elections against legislators perceived to be for the passage of the Bill into law. Using the teachings of the Philippine bishops, Genilo shows that such tactic is "inappropriately engaging in partisan politics", it compromises the primacy of conscience of voters, and reinforces the deformation of Philippine politics, not to mention the other unethical methods used by some overly eager anti-RH Bill activists (e.g., demonization of conscientious objectors, distortion of data, false accusations, etc.). To continue on this pathway, rather than a critical and constructive engagement with legislators and stakeholders, would distort the proper role of the church as a whole in politics.

The process of crafting good laws and public policies is as much an area of church - state or political - religious conflict as their implementation. In the last paper of this collection, *Bibo ergo sum* ("I drink therefore I am"), Randy Odchigue gives us as example the gradual but steady destruction of the vast Taguibo Watershed that supplies water to the huge Agusan River and sustains the natural and

Preface

human ecology of the areas where it runs through. The essay criticizes the “disengaged pacifism” of some clergy and calls them “a betrayal of one’s identity as a chronicler of the Christian narrative of dissent” even as it rightly questions the local bishop’s association with the government that has tolerated if not encouraged the cycle of corruption, environmental destruction, and degradation of indigenous peoples in the area. Both frameworks, says Odchigue, epitomize the totemic function of the Catholic Church as mere instrument of social cohesion having the pedagogical privilege over other narratives and public institutions. In its stead, the paper proposes the enduring value of the Christian narrative as “framework of engagement” by “getting in touch with its dissenting particularity”, “interrogating a particular milieu” to be able to articulate a relevant and efficacious faith-option, and “actively positioning itself as a dynamic dialogue partner” of other discourses that have direct correlation with the exploitation of the earth and the violence to the poor. At the moment, Odchigue informs us, the positive result of this framework is a strong network of stakeholders coming from different shades of the ideological, religious, and professional spectrum and acting as a “web of influence” to save the Taguibo Watershed.

This collection of theological papers does not pretend to exhaust all the ramifications of politics and the Christian tradition, but, as in the previous collection of papers, it puts the synergy of the theological association firmly in the trajectory of promoting faith-options for a just and inclusive church and society.

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