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**CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE
OF THE PHILIPPINES (CBCP)**

**PASTORAL EXHORTATION
ON PHILIPPINE POLITICS**

**F. CLIFTON WHITE RESOURCE CENTER 2/00
INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR ELECTION SYSTEMS**

Pope John Paul II has spoken of a new springtime of Christian life which will occur in the third millennium if we Christians become docile to the action of the Holy Spirit (TMA, no. 18). Looking ahead to the 2000th anniversary of our Lord's birth--the Great Jubilee--he calls for conversion, for renewal in the Gospel, for all of us. It is his prayer that God's abundant grace will be poured out on the world, come the Great Jubilee, and so he asks that we prepare ourselves for the hoped-for outpouring of His salvific love.

To help us on the way of conversion and renewal, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) has decided to issue each year, starting this year, a special full-length pastoral letter dealing with an aspect of Philippine life which in its view urgently needs change and renewal according to the Gospel.

This year the CBCP chose to dwell on the way we conduct politics in our country.

Since 1945, when the CBCP itself started functioning as a Conference, more than half of its pastoral letters and statements have dealt with political questions (see PL). In 1991, the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP-II) devoted a good amount of time and space in its final document to the discussion of the role of the Church in politics (see PCP-II, par. 330-53). Why has the Church been unusually pro-active in addressing the subject of politics since the end of World War II and especially since the Martial Law years and the restoration of our democracy in 1986?

There is one main reason: Philippine politics--the way it is practiced--has been most hurtful of us as a people. It is possibly the biggest bane in our life as a nation and the most pernicious obstacle to our achieving full human development.

But why is this so?

A. THE POLITICAL SCENE

Politics is—or ought to be—the art of government and public service. But sadly, in the Philippines, it has degenerated into an arena where the interests of the powerful and rich few are pitted against those of the weak and poor many. It interferes with the administration of justice and the equal application of the law, heavily weighted as it most patently is on the side of the politically connected. Political debts are paid with appointments to high offices of those to whom elected officials are indebted, blind loyalty counting as the most important criterion in the selection of public officials—even for government agencies mandated to be independent by the Constitution. The bureaucracy is packed with political proteges, many of whom do nothing except to collect their salaries on the middle and end of each month. Thus the well-intentioned among career officials and employees in government become demoralized early or withdraw into silence or resign altogether. And those who opt to continue despite disillusionment are only too often harassed or eventually coopted into the system.

The constitutional principles of separation of powers and of checks and balances among the three departments of government are, on the one hand, abused to create gridlock for political mileage; and, on the other hand, conveniently set aside on occasion for reciprocal advantage. Thus, for example, to entrench themselves in office or to promote their political future, those in the Executive Department cooperate with Congress in padding the government budget with all kinds of pork barrel items—the Countrywide Development Funds, for example, congressional insertions, the special funds in the public works bills—for the disposition of politicians and the discretionary funds of the President. On top of these, the resources or facilities of specialized or autonomous organizations where there is little or no public accountability—such as the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation (PAGCOR), Philippine Charity

Sweepstakes Organization (PCSO), the Bases Conversion and Development Agency (BCDA) or sequestered companies--are made to be easily accessible for political ends. The system is shot through and through with opportunities for corruption, influence-peddling and the indiscriminate use of public funds for partisan or personal purposes.

When it comes to elections, the electoral process has been systematically subverted with increasingly sophisticated methods of tilting the playing field or committing fraud with the result that elections are in danger of losing their credibility as a reliable means for effecting change. The machinery for cheating is planned well in advance starting with the appointment of loyal lieutenants to sensitive agencies and positions that have to do with elections, the audit of government funds or the enforcement of the Ethics Law. This is combined with an elaborate propaganda machine, including government-controlled media, the purpose of which is to destroy the reputation of critics and political opponents. This is also to manipulate public perceptions of government performance or to simply promote the interests of those in power and of their political protegeses.

People have become so cynical of government, of Congress and of the electoral process itself, that often they lose sight of the relevance of their vote to their life or future and sell it for momentary financial gain. Thus, despite the pleas of the Church and other responsible groups, election after election, for citizens to be vigilant fiscalizers of government expenditures, many have become indifferent to corruption or themselves want to have "a piece of the action." Despite too the guidelines regularly issued for the principled choice of candidates, many an undeserving man or woman still, just as regularly, gets voted into office.

If we are what we are today--a country with a very great number of poor and powerless people--one reason is the way we have allowed politics to be debased and prostituted to the low level it is in now. What we have said so far above about politics in our country does not by any means exhaust all we

can say about it. We need to have a closer look then at our political culture in order to be able to do something constructive with it by way of the renewal and conversion we seek in preparation for the Great Jubilee.

B. OUR POLITICAL CULTURE

Let us begin with a typical politician's concept of public office. And even as we speak here of "a typical politician", we should soberly ask ourselves if the ideas and values, motives and acts, that we attribute to him may not be, if we are honest with ourselves, not too different from our own.

Our Constitution describes public office as a public trust meant for the good of civil society at large. Yet many a politician looks at it as a means of enrichment and a source of influence and power for self- and family-interests. It hence easily becomes considered and actually treated as some sort of private property to be passed on from one generation to another in the manner of a feudal title—the perpetuation of power that is at the base of so-called "family dynasties." In this manner no distinction is made between public funds and private money.

What accounts for this sad state of things, for the degeneration unto evil, if we may put it as starkly as we can, rather than the transformation unto good of a person who is interested in a political career? What kind of political system have we created where base power and greed, not lofty principles of self-sacrificing service, are all too often the operative norms of conduct of public officials? For some of the answers, it would be of help to scrutinize a little more intensely one aspect of our politics: the election process. We choose to focus on it if only for the fact that it is at election time that the worst flaws of our political system and culture glaringly show themselves in their most degrading forms.

Pre-Election Day Activities. In the campaign period, the first focus of attention is

on getting oneself chosen as the candidate of a party. Very early on, a candidate seeking support from the "kingmakers" is advised that he must learn to deal with "political reality" and he is supposed to do this by adopting the traditional method of political horsetrading, of promising patronage to financial supporters, of buying the loyalty of local traders. Soon enough he becomes adept in the ways of self-serving opportunism and he looks for a party that can help him fulfill his ambitions without regard to ideology and platform. Thus it is commonplace to see or hear of disappointed candidates switching party affiliations or founding their own parties. There is no difficulty whatsoever for an office-aspirant to be sworn into one party after another, no real stigma being attached to "turn-coatism".

Prospective candidates make sure they get plenty of public exposure. To have this they cultivate media people assiduously and resort to bribing journalists to make sure they land in the news. At this stage they already incur huge expenses even as they breed corruption in the media. In turn those already in government who become afflicted with the election bug use public funds to finance "public service" messages or institutional ads that trumpet their accomplishments. With the use of government facilities, public money and the bureaucracy itself, they also jump the gun on election campaigning by organizing "inspection trips" to the most far-flung areas--with media people in tow. One cannot but wonder at the degree of moral erosion candidates must already be suffering at this point in their career.

When convention time comes, delegates are "wined, dined and womened"--as the gross but only too accurate expression cynically puts it--in order to win their votes. Here at the convention level alone, election spending gets even more heavy. If candidates spend enormous amounts of money freely in the election campaign period, everybody knows they do so in the certainty that they will be able to recoup every single item of expense and more when they assume office; and that if they eventually manage by whatever devious means to become themselves "kingpins" in their own right, they will be more than compensated for

by national candidates who need the support of their political machinery.

The campaign period turns the Philippine scene into a mad circus, a vast entertainment plaza. Candidates will, during this period, do whatever their audience bids them to do--in sharp contrast to their deafness to the same people's cries for attention once they are in office. They will dance, clown, kick-box, sing, use gutter language--anything to sell themselves and heighten "name recall." In short, they do everything except educate the electorate on issues. They hire expensive advertising agencies to polish up their image, often without regard to the truth, and to produce sound-bites and one-liners that will go over well in political rallies and quick interviews on radio and television. All of which only serve to worsen our personality-oriented brand of politics.

People take advantage of the campaign period to ask donations for every conceivable "project" from the candidates who are pressured to give under pain of losing valuable votes. This in turn forces candidates to solicit or accept contributions from vested interests who expect a return after the elections. The same goes with the party in power: It misuses government funds and other resources for electioneering purposes. When later those guilty become vulnerable to prosecution, they whitewash investigations with the help of proteges previously deployed in strategic agencies, even go to the extent of legislating amendments to "decriminalize" their violations.

"Dirty tricks, black propaganda, mudslinging"--anything to weaken or destroy the opposition --these are liberally resorted to. In short, the laws of ordinary morality are suspended during the campaign period in favor of office seekers and their supporters.

Election Day Activities. Winning at any cost and by any means--this has become the paramount principle governing candidates and parties in their election bid. This translates on election day itself into vote-buying, the use of "flying voters", the intimidation of voters for the opposition, violence, even murder; and, for turning already cast votes in one's favor, into

bribery of election officials, deliberate miscounting of votes, tampering with ballots and election results. The genius and imagination required for cheating are truly stupendous and are exercised to the full--one would only wish they were used for more noble purposes than achieving undeserved victories for undeserving candidates.

While election day violence has considerably diminished, there are still many places where voters are scared off by threats of violence, where voters' lists and even voting paraphernalia are purposely made unavailable in the precincts. Even in areas where the polls seem to be peaceful, there often is a strong undercurrent of tension because of a pervasive sense among the people that if candidates and their followers--and election officials themselves--are not watched closely, something not quite above board is going to happen. The monitoring by citizens' groups of election day activities thus becomes a necessity, even if at times highly hazardous.

Except at the barangay level, it is not unusual for election results--even for local contests--not to be known at the end of election day. The slow tabulation of final results is one clear evil of our electoral process that somehow to date continues to be unaccepting of corrective measures.

The Post-Election Period. Confusion is the order of the day in many a community. And it has to be with the final canvassing of election results and the proclamation of winners, as has already been said, taking an unduly long time to happen. Every loser cries "foul!", declares himself cheated, and election results are not accepted. The COMELEC takes its own sweet time deciding on election protests so that when initial verdicts are finally overturned, cheating anomalies corrected, those belatedly declared winners are barely able to assume their seats before the new election takes place.

What follows is the whole tissue of evils in our way of conducting politics that we started detailing in the earlier parts of this letter. Thus election winners, once in, use their office for gain and the shoring up of their power. Paying

political debts, recouping election expenses, making fat profits for themselves--these cannot be done without resorting to all kinds of corrupt practices. "Kick-backs" (amounting sometimes to as much as 40% of the cost of a project), rigged contract biddings for public constructions, padding of expense accounts and payrolls, nepotism, the misuse of pork barrel funds, influence peddling--all kinds of other unimaginable malpractices which often go undetected and unpunished--are spawned and proliferate egregiously.

We spoke above of the whole election process taking on the trappings of a mega-entertainment circus for the public. Yet even while it dazzles and titillates, it already starts producing the tragic fruits that make our country one of the worst in the world in terms of skewed income distribution and among the most corrupt--these two facts are unfortunately intimately related like night to day.

The worst part of the bad scene we have been looking at is that we, the people, even if cynically, seem to accept them as inevitable and ordinary modes of proceeding of elected officials. And we have to ask what we asked above, namely, if what we described as the typical politician's mindset is not perchance--deep down-- somehow ours too.

We reiterate what we have already noted about the place of faith in our political culture: It is systematically excluded. The prime values of our faith--charity, justice, honesty, truth--these are of little or no consequence at all when it come to our practice of politics in or out of election time. True, religion is made use of: Candidates pay ostentatious courtesy calls on Churchmen; political conventions and other official gatherings are incomplete without prayers of invocation. But these are more instances of religion being used for political purposes than of religion influencing politics.

But why should this be so in a nation where the vast majority of the people are Catholic and Christian? Our faith in God has played a key role in major events of our history--even in a decidedly political matter like the

People Power Revolution of EDSA. Yet politics as a whole has been, strangely, largely impervious to the Gospel. Our political culture denies, to our shame, our proud claim to the name Christian.

C. SIGNS OF HOPE

While the foregoing is an unflattering description of the dominant character of our politics, and it seems unrelievedly black, still, there have been shining moments in our political life that give us reason to hope--and the motivation to work even harder together--for the renewal of our life as Christians and as Filipinos for the creation of a new political order.

We look at our history and we note that the Philippine electorate have more frequently removed rather than retained administration candidates and have had their judgment respected by losing candidates. We saw in the 1978 elections during Martial Law how people took the risk of speaking out with a noise barrage against the excesses and abuses of the regime.

In 1984 and 1986, volunteer citizen groups in massive numbers, unmindful of danger to themselves, courageously safeguarded the ballot against a seemingly invincible government machinery bent on thwarting the people's will. At EDSA, in the storied People Power Revolution, ordinary citizens successfully ended an entrenched authoritarian regime and restored lost democratic freedoms in a non-violent rebellion that has had repercussions all over the world for people seeking an end to oppressive governments.

We experienced the peaceful transfer of power in 1992, the first in 27 years, because of the example of a president who chose to step down graciously from power and because of the unprecedented cooperation in the conduct of the election between a revitalized COMELEC and its deputies on the one hand, and on the other,

citizens' arms like NGOs (non-government organizations) and POs (people's organizations), Church groups and the media.

We have seen, in the aftermath of the 1995 elections and allegations of *dagdag-bawas*, members of the Board of Canvassers of a province (Bataan) publicly attesting through affidavits to the fraudulent acts of election officials. We have also seen the examples of (a) lowly bureaucrats in the Health Department exposing the corruption of an appointee to the Cabinet and helping put pressure on the President to finally withdraw his nomination; (b) senior COMELEC officials risking retaliation by making public inefficiencies and irregularities in their offices; (c) government officials responsibly discharging their duties by calling attention to environmental degradation in our midst; and (d) a presidential commission braving the ire of Congress by releasing for the information of the public their analysis of how the people's money is wasted and pocketed by elected officials.

Some voting patterns of recent elections also give us a glimpse of what is possible: people beginning to vote more intelligently and not allowing themselves to be discouraged even when those they thought worthy turn out to be otherwise; voters choosing non-politicians over "traditional" ones, electing younger and presumably more idealistic candidates over those with money; or going for candidates of known probity and good performance instead of those supported by the usual power brokers. Many new and young faces are entering politics at the barangay and local levels and winning over very wealthy opponents and members of political clans whose heavy election spending for once is rendered futile.

We cannot discount or ignore these and many other positive developments in the nation's political life, few and far between though they may be in the face of the many negative facts we saw above. It is all the more reason then why we must treasure them and hold them up as examples to be emulated and replicated again and again, why we must engage ourselves totally against the forces that stand in the way of reform and systemic change,

may be loudly intervening in the political process especially during elections.

E. THE BASIS OF THE CHURCH'S MISSION IN POLITICS

Politics Has a Religious and Moral Dimension--this is the general principle we start with. Every informed Catholic should be aware of this simple incontrovertible truth: Our Catholic faith is concerned with the religious and moral dimension of life; but every human activity that flows from the normal processes of intellect and will has a religious and moral dimension, since it may either lead to grace or to sin. Or, as we said in the beginning, it may hurt or benefit people, it may upbuild or destroy them. Being a human activity politics has, therefore, a religious and moral dimension which our Catholic faith simply cannot ignore.

There are at least five bases for the Church's mission which explicitate the above general principle.

1. *The Gospel and the Kingdom of God Call the Church to Political Involvement.* Christian Scripture scholars universally recognize the fact that at the center of Jesus' mission was his proclaiming of the Kingdom of God, the Reign of God. The very first words of Jesus in the Gospel of St. Mark proclaim: "The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel!" (Mk. 1:15) To face the reality of the Kingdom requires a renewal of life in accordance with the Gospel. We must not only pray, "Your kingdom come" (Mt. 6:10). We must also act to help bring it about: by renewing our lives, by defending and promoting Kingdom values, especially justice, peace, truth and love, freedom, mercy and reconciliation. To promote the values of the Reign of God is to do God's will. And God's will must be done in all areas of human activity especially, in our social context, in the sphere of politics where we see the values of the kingdom terribly absent. When Jesus said, "Proclaim the Gospel to all creation

(Mk. 16:15), it was never his will to exclude politics. We have to proclaim the Gospel in the field of politics. We have to evangelize and renew it. The Church would be abandoning her mission if she fails to imbue politics with the light of the Gospel and the Reign of God.

2. *The Church's Mission of Integral Salvation Involves the Temporal Sphere.* Undeniably, the Church's mission is one of salvation. Unfortunately, many people understand salvation as solely pertaining to the soul. They therefore should wonder what the resurrection of the body has to do with salvation. Again the simple truth is that salvation has to do not only with the soul but with the total reality of the human person, soul and body; spiritual and material, eternal and temporal. This is why Jesus not only forgave sins, he also liberated people from physical sickness. This is also one basis for believing in the resurrection of the dead. Salvation has, therefore, to do not only with the after-life but also with liberation in this life, even if only initially and partially. Thus Jesus could say to Zaccheus: "Today salvation has come to this house" (Lk. 19:9). For this reason the Church has always taught what Vatican II declared: "Christ's redemptive work, while of itself directed toward the salvation of all, involves the renewal of the whole temporal order. Hence, the mission of the Church is not only to bring to everyone the message of grace of Christ, but also to penetrate and perfect the temporal sphere with the spirit of the Gospel" (AA, 15).

Moreover, salvation is concerned not only with the individual but also with the community, for personal salvation depends on God's grace acting not only directly on an individual but also through a community. This is a necessary and unavoidable implication of the believing community as the Body of Christ, "a holy nation." We therefore believe that the Church is God's sign and instrument of salvation. As a consequence, the Church has to proclaim the gospel of salvation to the political community, if only for the fact that politics has such a decisive influence on the total good of human beings.

3. *Salvation is from Personal and Social Sin, Including Sin in the Political Sphere.* The Church's role in politics is also better understood when we consider that sin can take root in political activities. For sin is not only personal but social as well (see CFC, 1166-71). Sin is, indeed, found first of all in the human heart. But sin also extends its influence through situations and "structures of sin", such as the kind of "dirty politics" described earlier—a politics as the popular saying goes, of "guns, goons and gold," a politics of deceit and dishonesty, of unprincipled compromise, convenience and expediency, a politics of greed. It seems almost impossible to change such established ways of politicking in our country, so tragically and deeply has sin embedded itself in them. For the Church, therefore, to be an authentic sign and instrument of integral salvation, it has to work to vanquish sin in the political order too (cf. SRS, 36-38; also RP, 16).

4. *The Church has an Option for the Poor in the Field of Politics.* We have seen how political forces in our society are heavily tilted against the poor. As economic power is in the hands of the elite, so is political power. To help correct this imbalance "those who have less in life should have more in law." But sadly many laws and policies in our country favor the rich and the powerful to the detriment of the poor. When the moment of truth comes, those who hold the reins of political and economic power look exclusively to their own interests. Examples abound but we cite just these few: the watering down of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program, the growing number of exemptions from the Program, the primacy given to big business over the small farmer, the maintenance of family political dynasties that lord it over the poor. Pro-poor many politicians are definitely not despite their protestations. Thus the Church's mission to renew and transform our political institutions and activities: Unless the Church pursues this mission, politics will continue to militate against the poor.

The clear teaching and example of Christ is for every Christian believer to be pro-poor and for the Church to have an option for the poor (PCP-II, 312-14; see CFC, 1187-89). To realize this Gospel imperative of option for the

poor, the Church must labor to try evangelizing and transforming our country's politics, its institutions, relationships, values and behavior so that politics will work *preferentially* for the poor.

5. *The Way of the Church is the Human Person Who is Affected by Politics.* Indeed, politics can make or unmake the human person. It can lead the human person to the common good or it can dehumanize him by entrapping him in sinful political structures. But the mission of salvation urges the Church to collaborate with others in the development of the whole human being and of all human beings. This is why Pope John Paul II points out in his first encyclical letter, *Redemptor Hominis*, that the concrete human being living in history is the "way for the Church" (RH, 14; also CA, 53-54). The Church cannot ignore the forces that influence the person for good or ill--and politics is such a force. Were the Church to do so, she would be betraying her own mission on behalf of the human person.

The above considerations ground the Church's involvement in politics. Flowing from the Gospel, they are simple basic truths of our Catholic faith. When the Church denounces political attitudes, behavior or structures that are counter to the Gospel and to the Reign of God and militate against the integral salvation of the human person, especially of the poor, why would some, even well educated Catholics, condemn the Church for "political interference"? And why is it that no similar outcry is heard when the Church supports or praises government initiatives? To support is not interference while to denounce is? A very strange logic, indeed! We can only conclude that the basic reason is a poor understanding of the Church's mission.

F. MORAL AND RELIGIOUS TRUTHS GUIDING POLITICS

If the Church does intervene in politics on the moral and religious bases presented above, it exercises this right and duty in various

ways, above all by teaching moral and religious truths that should guide and transform politics according to the Gospel. The Scriptures, the moral and social teachings of the Church supply us with these valuable principles (see CFC, 1162-63, 1193).

1. *Human Dignity and Solidarity*--a First Principle of Politics. The first principle is human dignity and solidarity. Human dignity flows from the fundamental reality that the human person, male and female, is created unto the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and is called to share eternal life with God. In Christian belief, the fact that Jesus Christ is God-made-Man to redeem the human being from slavery to sin is an integral dimension of human dignity. This is why the Church's "contribution to the political order is precisely her vision of the dignity of the person revealed in all its fullness in the mystery of the Incarnate Word" (CA, 47).

Politics must respect and promote human dignity and the fundamental human rights that flow from such dignity. When politicians exploit their fellow citizens and deny their will in electoral processes through fraud and violence, when they promote their own vested interests through any means, fair or foul, because of greed for power or possessions at the expense of others, they thereby brazenly dismiss the human dignity of their fellow human beings.

The equal dignity of all human beings brings them into mutual solidarity. By solidarity they are brought together not through superficial human sentiments or vague feelings of the unity of humankind but through active bonds of mutual respect, love, and service. Solidarity is a "firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, i.e., to the good of all and of each individual because we are really responsible for all" (SRS, 38). Solidarity is destroyed by the selfish competition and greedy ambitioning for power that characterizes our political culture. Is this not happening even today because of the ill-advised and divisive move to extend terms of political office by changing the Constitution? The common good is invoked for such a move. This would perhaps be a bit credible were the politicians behind such a move known to be great champions of the

common good rather than officials perceived popularly as *trapos*--the very kind of politicians from whose clutches the enlightened citizenry has been trying to liberate the nation.

2. *The Common Good*--the Goal of Political Activity. It is a cardinal teaching of the Church that the political community exists for the common good. This common good embraces "the good of all and of each individual" (SRS, 38), and is "the sum total of all those conditions of social life which enables individuals, families, and organizations to achieve complete and efficacious fulfillment" (GS, 74). Political activity then should be directed precisely not at the triumph of the interests of an individual, a family, a social class, or a political party, but at the attainment of the universal good of all. Unfortunately in the political history of our country, rare have been the times when the common good has been foremost as the actual goal of political parties. Indeed, in politics the common good is tragically uncommon, power and profit for self and family being the dominant ends of political engagement.

3. *Authority and Power*--A Divine Trust for Service. It must likewise be emphasized that all authority and power emanate from God. This is the clear teaching of Scriptures: "There is no authority except from God" (Rom. 13:1). And God gives authority only in trust. As the steward of this trust, the office holder is beholden to God and is responsible to God to whom an account must be given for his fulfillment of it. Authority is not for personal aggrandizement or domination. It is given for service (see Mk. 10:45) so that the person in authority can help others grow in dignity and unity (2 Cor. 10:8). To use one's office and its power only to serve one's own interests is to contradict the very nature and purpose of authority and also betray the people who rightly expect to be served. Officials who do not serve do not deserve to hold authority.

When legitimately constituted authority is exercised within the limits of its competence and in accord with the moral law, it must be respected and obeyed. But when it is used contrary to the moral law, the will of God is violated and authority loses its right to be

obeyed. Clearly, no citizen is obliged to obey a command to do what is morally wrong. In fact, all citizens are obliged to resist the wrong use of authority and to declare: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Vatican II reiterates this scriptural teaching: "It is legitimate for them (citizens) to defend their own rights and those of their fellow citizens against abuses of this authority within the limits of the natural law and the law of the Gospel" (GS, 74). This is the principle that impelled the Filipino people to achieve the peaceful 1986 EDSA Revolution.

4. *Between the Political Community and the Church—Mutual Collaboration.* Further even though the Kingdom of God cannot be equated with material progress and well being, the mission of the Church and the mission of the political community to promote the common good partially coincide. It is therefore to the interest of both Church and political community that people live harmoniously and work together for total progress. There are human needs that the political community can best serve and there are human needs that transcend temporal well-being which only the Church can meet. Mutual collaboration is therefore necessary so that the integral development of the human person and of all persons in society is realized.

But the collaboration of the Church is given through critical discernment. The higher law of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God remains the fundamental norm of the Church's collaboration. By reason of this norm the Church cannot be identified with any political community, political party or ideology. Nor can the Church canonize any one form of political regime. "The choice of the political regime and the appointment of rulers are left to the decisions of citizens" (GS, 74), guided by the principle presented above. But clearly the Church cannot accept a political regime that is contrary to the Gospel. Moreover, the Church "cannot encourage the formation of narrow ruling groups which usurp the power of the State for individual interests or for ideological ends" (CA, 46).

G. THE SPECIFIC MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN POLITICS

In the light of the above, what then is the specific mission of the Church in the political order? The answer lies in the insight of the 1971 Synod of Bishops on Justice in the World: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appears to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel". From this insight flow a number of important corollaries.

1. *The Task of Integral Development--Using Politics as a Means.* As part of its God-given mission, the Church has the right and duty to work for total human development, freedom and justice, respect for human rights and peace. The notion of integral human development would in fact include all the rest, since such a development is the authentic realization of all the fundamental rightful aspirations, material and spiritual, of the human person and of all persons. Such human development would also require the "creation of structures of participation and shared responsibility" (CA, 46). Precisely because of this mission, the Church has also the right and duty to teach and intervene in the political order, to participate in the common effort to make electoral processes truly democratic and fair, and so to renew the political order. Politics must become an effective means for integral development for all rather than a tool for the advancement of a privileged few.

2. *The Mission of the Laity.* Direct participation in the political order is the special responsibility of the laity in the Church. It is their specific task to renew the temporal order according to Gospel principles and values. On the other hand, it is the specific task of the hierarchy to teach authoritatively what the Church believes or holds concerning the political order.

Vatican II states: "The Church praises and esteems those who devote themselves to the public good for the service of all and take upon themselves the burdens of public office" (GS, 75). It also adds this encouragement: "Those

with talent for the difficult and noble art of politics, or whose talents in this matter can be developed, should prepare themselves for it, and forgetting their own convenience and material interests, they should engage in political activity" (*Ibid.*).

It is along these same lines that PCP-II states: "In the Philippines today, given the general perception that politics has become an obstacle to integral development, the urgent necessity is for the lay faithful to participate more actively, with singular competence and integrity, in political affairs" (PCP-II, 348). PCP-II strongly urged that competent and conscientious persons of integrity should become political candidates. And the laity must "help form the civic conscience of the voting population and work to explicitly promote the election of leaders of true integrity to public office" (PCP-II, Art. 8, #1).

PCP-II underlined the following truths to guide the participation of Catholics in political life:

- a. That the basic standard for participation be the pursuit of the common good;
- b. That participation be characterized by a defense and promotion of justice;
- c. That participation be inspired and guided by the spirit of service;
- d. That it be imbued with a love of preference for the poor; and
- e. That empowering people be carried out as a process and as a goal of political activity (PCP-II, 351).

We draw conclusions from the above for Catholic politicians: they are to decide and act in public life according to the principles of Catholic faith and morality; they should not separate their religion from the exercise of their public office; and while respecting the religious freedom of others, they must not be afraid to act in public life in accordance with their faith and in true witnessing to the Gospel.

3. *Plurality of Options in Political Life.* We must also be aware that in the light of the Gospel and consistent with the Gospel, there are many political options open to Catholics (GS, 43). The Gospel does not prescribe only one way of being

political nor only one way of political governing whether monarchical, presidential, parliamentary, or whatever. Justice, peace and integral development can be pursued through many political ways. Hence there can be no one political party nor one political program that can exclusively claim the name Catholic. That is why there is normally no such thing as "the Catholic vote." Nor can particular Catholic groups present their candidates as *the* Church's candidates. The members of the hierarchy simply set guidelines to help the laity vote wisely. Under normal circumstances, they do not endorse any particular candidate or party but leave the laity to vote according to their enlightened and formed consciences.

Given a plurality of possible options consistent with the Gospel, freedom of choice has to be a right we must especially value in a democracy. A particular political option becomes obligatory to Catholics only when it is clearly the only one demanded by the Gospel, even more so when it is clarified and taught authoritatively by the magisterium.

4. *Partisanship in Politics.* It is precisely because of the possibility of plural options in politics that Church people who hold positions of leadership in the Church do not ordinarily engage in what is called "partisan politics." Church leaders represent the entire community which they head or lead and for them to publicly and officially, as it were, push for one option over others when these are equally compatible with the Gospel and hence moral would be tantamount to claiming theirs is the only option in the Gospel to take and the people should follow their lead. This would be disastrous for the unity of the community. Where this kind of politics is concerned, the freedom of choice that we noted above must be part of our values should by all means be the guiding principle--most especially from the pulpit.

Above we referred to what PCP-II says about the laity's responsibility to "work to explicitly promote the election of leaders of true integrity to public office." This is not at all a call to form a "Catholic Party" or to have a slate of "Catholic Candidates" that must be supported by all but an encouragement for all to be more

organizations —"in season, out of season," or as the PPC-RV slogan has it, "*panghabang panahon*". Through catechesis on politics, people should be led to see the vital link between their life of faith and their political activity. They should be taught how to evaluate their options in politics to see whether or not they are in accord with the Gospel and the teachings of the Church. Catechesis should enable them to express their faith and be guided by their faith in their politics.

2. *Guidelines on Choosing Political Officials.* We have seen how many voters are influenced in choosing certain candidates not out of conscience but because of family relationships. We also know that the popularity of a candidate (often in another field of work such as sports, TV and movies) or the prospects of political and economic rewards, money and gifts—and a wrong sense of *utang na loob*—are strong factors in people's voting behavior. Competence, honesty, personal integrity and an acceptable program of government are not primary considerations. This is why in their campaigns politicians cater to what the voters want in terms of entertainment and gifts of cash or kind.

Political education includes increased awareness of guidelines to help people make the right choices, based on a properly formed conscience, in the election of candidates. This is the reason why, as we adverted to in the beginning, in the 50 years of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, the Philippine Bishops have been providing such guidelines almost as a matter course everytime national elections come. Church instrumentalities at the national level, such as the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPC-RV) and NASSA-VOTE CARE, have also disseminated similar guidelines. We urge everyone to be more aware of the guidelines, reflect on them, discuss them with others, and seriously follow them on the basis of their faith commitment, their religious and moral sense, in judging the qualities or competences of candidates for office.

Preparation for Political Leadership. There is at present no program through which persons of integrity and political

knowledge can be prepared to participate in the noble but difficult art of politics. The Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences have more than once called for such a preparation in the light of the Asian political situation (see 1986 Tokyo and 1990 Bandung FABC final statements). Such an agenda is especially imperative in the Philippine situation.

Possible political leaders should be schooled in the principles and practice of doing politics in a Christian way, in accord with the Gospels, the values of the Kingdom of God, the moral teachings of the Church, especially its social teachings. An implication of PCP-II's stand urging persons in responsible positions to promote actively the election of worthy candidates is the necessity of preparing these candidates for public office. If economic managers are schooled in their field, political leaders should also be formed so that they may discharge the burdens of public office with competence and integrity.

4. *Conversion to New Values.* The most basic pastoral action needed is conversion to new values. This should be the aim of catechesis on politics. There will be no radical change in our political situation unless we all undergo a change of heart--conversion, therefore--in our priorities, in our values.

In our society a high premium is put on power and money. Compromises are made, truth is subverted, principles are abandoned, elections are rigged, frauds are perpetrated, politicians perpetuate themselves in power, their families are placed in positions of authority, "options are kept open"--simply because of power and money, the prime values of our present political culture. That is why financial supporters invest tremendous amounts of money on candidates and the candidates themselves spend so much to be elected--not because of what they vaguely invoke as "the people's will" or "the common good"-- but because of the power and the easy money they seek.

Let us not be fools. As we said earlier, we know that expenses are recouped,

gargantuan profits made once political victory is achieved. The conscienceless remark of a politician years ago wanting to take advantage of power remains operative even to this day: "What are we in power for?"

We need to change all this. Conversion to new values is the most basic of pastoral action. Again this points to the need for, as a first step, catechesis on politics, the need for political re-education at all levels of society and the Church, laity, religious, priests and bishops. It is noteworthy that at the level of grassroots Basic Ecclesial Communities, such a political re-education is taking place quite effectively.

At the level of Church leaders--whether clerical or lay--conversion is also imperative. By accepting special gifts and privileges from so-called *trapos*, by allowing them or their immediate relatives to take positions of authority in religious organizations, we are abetting their deeds of dishonesty and fraud, graft and corruption, and helping them maintain their power. By such conduct we allow our prophetic denunciation of political evils to lose its sharpness and credibility. We need to change our ways and be true prophets in our day.

5. *Structural Change*--a Goal of Pastoral Action. If personal conversion to new values is imperative, so is structural change. Many of the negative values that we have as a people are strongly embedded in some of our political processes. We spoke above of the unconscionable delays in announcing election winners. The delay is often due not only to the incompetence of election officials but also to manipulation of the electoral process by interested groups. Our electoral process is riddled with loopholes that make it possible for all sorts of evils to take place--cheating in registering, in voting, in counting and tabulating votes, in reporting results, in protesting against the results, in resolving protests, etc. Delays create additional evils. The notorious *dagdag-bawas* of the last senatorial election was made possible because of structural manipulation of the electoral process and because of delays. Indeed, reforms in the electoral process are necessary. A few years ago, the most trustworthy COMELEC in the past 30 years

urged Congress to pass a number of electoral recommendations. By the time the very credible head of that COMELEC retired, Congress had not yet taken any action on the recommendations. Among the recommendations was to do away with political family dynasties—something the Constitution itself advocates. This was a threat to Congress. Structural changes are indeed urgent, in the electoral process especially, and hence the reform of that process must become a high priority for all of us.

6. *Active Participation of Civil Society.* With gratitude we consider the work of thousands upon thousands of volunteers working in non-partisan groups such as NAMFREL, PPC-RV, NASSA-VOTE CARE, Operation Quick Count, to name a few. These volunteers in NGOs and Church-based organizations have done a great service in witnessing to their conscience and faith to renew the political order, despite physical and psychological hardships and even the risk of life.

However, such heroic efforts are not enough. The whole citizenry must awaken to the fact that the Filipino religious and moral sense is being destroyed by many factors, one of the most significant being politics. A general movement of civil society must take place to renew politics and rid it of its evil dimensions. Civic organizations, peoples' organizations, associations of lay people and religious, school associations, etc.—all have to band together in true and active solidarity for the sake of the country.

The Church is committed towards such solidarity by helping create awareness of our social ills and by conducting values education in politics through its own network of resources and means of social communications; and beyond awareness and values, by encouraging and supporting action for change.

7. *Political Advocacy.* Pastoral action in the political sphere should also take the form of active advocacy. Everyone should be interested in knowing what bills are being considered by Congress, what positions regarding important legislations are being taken by senators and

congresspersons. In solidarity civil society must articulate their support for laws, policies, and structural changes that will improve our lives in society and our political processes. It must lobby to defeat bills that militate against the aspirations of the poor, the integral development of our people, the integrity of creation, moral values in the family, the welfare of women, children and the young. Lobbying is seen unfortunately as the exclusive turf of those with vested economic interests, who evince little concern for the common good.

It is a Christian task to work for laws that will bring about genuine prosperity, more equitable distribution of income and wealth, the promotion of the rights of the poor and of indigenous peoples. It is a Christian task to lobby for electoral reforms so that the people's will may not be subverted.

Such active advocacy and lobbying requires a long and tedious process such as research, group organizing, participation in congressional hearings, and using various media to make the people know what is being done or not done in Congress regarding their destiny. Hence, civil society must have a strong sense of purpose, coordinated solidarity, tenacity and perseverance.

8. *Organizing for Effective Change.* We have two groups in the Church that have been most effective over the years in working for clean and honest elections: the PPC-RV of the Commission on the Laity and the NASSA VOTE-CARE of the Commission on Social Action, Justice and Peace. At the last CBCP meeting in July this year, the proposal was made--and unanimously accepted by the bishops--that there should be a clear division of labor between the two groups, and it was decided that the PPC-RV will henceforth be the Church body that will coordinate the efforts of the various dioceses during election times; the VOTE-CARE, on the other hand, will be the Church agency for her efforts between election times to educate and conscientize people for the renewal of the social and political order. To each diocese is given the responsibility of mobilizing the two bodies and their workers for their respective tasks.

The tasks of the PPC-RV--the organizing of independent poll watchers for election day itself is one of its most important responsibilities--are quite clear from past experience. But for VOTE-CARE there will be need to get the dioceses acting in more programmatic fashion through their Social Action Centers not only for a more systematic and concerted conscientization effort at raising awareness and concern about political (and economic) problems but also for action on monitoring post-election graft-and-corruption practices at barangay, municipal and provincial levels and, as well, the performance of elected officials.

We trust these two Church bodies will become in every diocese the effective cutting edge of our efforts at doing something positive about the reform and renewal in the Gospel of our much debased political order.

9. *Constitutional Change.* Today we are faced with a political crisis of great magnitude. This is the attempt to change the 1987 Philippine Constitution. As Bishops we have reflected lengthily on this crisis, discussed its social, political, economic, and cultural context, and its various implications. And we are one in our stand against changing the Constitution now.

We are saddened that religious sects and well-intentioned people as well as the principles of democracy have been exploited to promote the efforts to revise the Constitution. The end result has been disastrous: the worst of traditional politics has brazenly flaunted itself, an economic crisis has been aggravated, trust and credibility in government have been broken, and people feel deceived and manipulated. There is great and righteous anger among our people.

The attempts at constitutional change demonstrate the evils of politics that we have been talking of here--deviousness, double talk, deception, manipulation, lack of transparency, the use of power to promote self-interests. All these are values that are anti-Gospel and anti-Kingdom of God. We cannot ignore these. We must move against them.

We believe that the way to unity is to unconditionally, unequivocally and irrevocably terminate all attempts to revise the Constitution at this time. When the time does come, let it be done with widespread participation and a unity of vision, with total transparency and serenity, with reasons unarguably directed to the common good rather than to the self-serving interests of politicians. All elected officials looking for an extension of terms must categorically state now that they will not under any circumstance accept any further nominations for office.

The task now is to rebuild trust and confidence. It will be a painstaking chore. But rebuilding trust and confidence as well as transforming politics into what is pleasing to God can surely be done--by us, the People of God, collaborating with other men and women of good faith.

CONCLUSION

At one point of our history, we badly needed change and we got it--through People Power, without violence, at the EDSA Revolution. What we did in 1986 is an unfinished revolution. The reform of political life and processes is a necessary complement to the 1986 EDSA event. The odds we faced then were greater but we prevailed. The odds we face now are likewise formidable, but we can prevail.

We invite all of you, our Brothers and Sisters in the Lord, to join us in a common resolve to clean up and to renew what we have seen is one of the most harmful aspects of our national life--today's kind of politics.

As at EDSA in 1986, so today: We must reason together for the common good, we must pray together and act together to transform politics into a means of national renewal, a means of just and integral development for every Filipino and for all Filipinos.

As at EDSA, so today: We do not work alone. As the Psalmist reminds us: "Unless the Lord build the house they labor in vain who build it" (Ps. 127:1). The work of conversion and renewal is indeed the work of God and He calls us to work with Him. This is the reason for our hope and our confidence -- the grace of Almighty God. May Mary, the Mother of the Lord and of our beloved country, obtain for us from the Lord Jesus the graces we need for this momentous mission so vital for our future as a nation.

For the Catholic Bishops' Conference of
the Philippines:

+OSCAR V. CRUZ, D.D.

President

16 September 1997

