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TH141 – K

The Challenge of Integral Evangelization in the Philippines

The Philippines is the only predominantly Christian country in Asia, with the majority of Christians belonging to the Catholic faith. Given this statement, one assumes that Philippine society is living in accordance with the ideals of Catholic doctrine. But is this the case today?

In the address *Men for Others* by Pedro Arrupe, S.J., he calls for the education for social justice and action today. In summary, Father Arrupe wants us to live as men and women for others; to serve, love, and promote justice among society with Jesus Christ as our example. This, in my opinion, will be met with some resistance by the Philippine Catholic Church, since Father Arrupe’s address has been branded by some as having radical ideas. His goal for the Church is not impossible, although it is rather difficult, as he states.

Philippine society also needs to undergo integral evangelization along with what Father Arrupe wants us to pursue. Integral evangelization is the proclaiming of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament to bring about a personal conversion that impels one to active involvement in the process of human development and liberation. It has three aspects, which are described below.

First is the aspect of evangelizing presence. The greatest symbol of God’s presence is a person committed to Him. Philippine society is not lacking in these people, as I have quite a lot of friends who have given themselves wholly to the Lord, and have moved me to do the same.

Second is building a community of dialogue. Active involvement with religious and human concerns determines effective integral evangelization. There are several religious groups here that are active in worship and community services, and I am proud to say that I am part of one of them.

The third and final aspect is the authentic efforts for human development and liberation. The Church’s mission is to foster and proclaim the Kingdom of God, and to promote peace, justice, and community. It is important for the laity to be involved in the socioeconomic and political realities for the Church to be successful. The Philippines is not secularized, so there is no clear division between Church and state. In effect, the Church has, to an extent, power and influence over national matters in the government.

There is, however, a division between the rich and the poor in the Philippines. In order to actualize our faith and achieve social justice for both sectors of our society, we must undergo liberation theology. It has two acts, the first a commitment to the poor and oppressed. Since majority of Philippine society is composed of the poor and oppressed, this is an important step towards liberation. The second act is a critical reflection on God’s revelation. This can be achieved mainly through religious and social involvement, such as celebrating the Eucharist and reflecting on the Gospel, then afterwards putting into action what was reflected.

Liberation has three dimensions: from sin, from sinful social structures, and from human faults and weaknesses. They are dependent on one another, as liberating one also means liberation from the others. The most pressing issue, however, in the Philippines is that of sinful social structures. As mentioned earlier, there is a division between the rich and the poor, with the latter making up most of the society. With the way society goes today, the rich keep on getting richer, and the poor poorer. In order to alleviate this, we must also focus on the other two dimensions. By liberating ourselves from sin and human faults and weakness, both of which focus on the individual, we in turn liberate our society from sinful social structures, thereby liberating ourselves fully.

Conscientization must also be a driving force in our liberation. It occurs from two directions. From above, the rich are involved in immersion programs opening up to the experience of the poor. The Ateneo, along with other schools and universities, have immersion and outreach programs for their students, who, for the most part, belong to the rich sector of society. These programs place the students directly within the midst of the poor, letting the students experience firsthand the daily lifestyle and tribulations of the poor. In some cases, though, the effect is reversed. I, for one, realized that the poor, though having less, have less problems and less to think about than most of us have. Their simple way of living gives them fewer concerns. The problem about this, in my opinion, is that the rich present themselves as an ideal model of society, something to strive to be. This impacts the poor’s image of themselves, and therefore, causing them to be malcontent with their current situation, and in effect aspiring themselves to be like the rich. What the poor don’t realize is that they already have what they need, nothing more, and nothing less. But when the poor finally get what they want, things change. This brings us to conscientization from below, liberating the poor from their tendency to imitate the oppressor when they gain some power. The poor, knowing not what to do with their power once they get hold of it, turn to the only example they know of how to use it – the oppressor. This can be solved by prompting the rich, who have been conscientized from above, to guide the poor in using their newfound power.

Clearly, the poor are the ones who are most in need from the Church. But that does not mean that the rich are excluded from the Church, hence the preferential option for the poor. Unlike the option for the poor, which only focuses on the poor and forfeiting the rich, the preferential option for the poor includes the rich in liberation, though focusing more on the poor. My local parish regularly holds fundraising events, from which the poor benefit. A portion of the collection during mass even goes to charities and institutions catering to the poor. Material needs are a reality of the human experience, and that the only way the poor can satisfy their material needs is through the rich. I think the preferential option for the poor is important, because by including the rich in the Church, they are more open to giving to the poor.

Orthodoxy and orthopraxis are essential for liberation. Orthodoxy is the right doctrine, and orthopraxis is the right action. To actualize our struggle for liberation, these two must go hand in hand, not independently. Orthodoxy and orthopraxis are similar to the two acts of liberation theology, and are achieved by similar ways as well, namely reflection and action. Orthodoxy, when one goes to mass, attends religious functions, and follows Church teachings. Orthopraxis, when one involves oneself in religious, socioeconomic, and political matters. A good example is the aforementioned religious groups, who worship and involve themselves.

In the movie *Romero*, El Salvador is seen in political turmoil, and that the Church plays a passive role at the beginning. The Church’s role is shifted to a more active one when Father Oscar Romero takes the place of archbishop. From a world of seclusion and books, he is immediately thrown into the outside world. This opened his eyes to the reality of the situation, prompting him into action for the Church to promote peace, love, and social justice. Due to this, he was viewed as a radical by some of his fellow clergy. In effect, Father Romero was killed because of his radical actions and ideas. This is an example of Father Arrupe’s statement, that becoming men and women for others is difficult, as Father Romero sacrificed his life for his goal, which was the liberation of the people of El Salvador, not only from the political turmoil, but also from the three dimensions of liberation theology. A similar situation happened here in the Philippines – the first EDSA revolution. Like El Salvador, the Philippines was in political turmoil, with the Marcos supporters on one side and the protesters on the other. The Church was actively involved in the uprising, with the late Cardinal Sin spearheading the involvement of the masses. The revolution was non-violent and was successful, although it still had its death count, including Ninoy Aquino, whose death sparked the revolution in the first place, plus several other activists and Marcos supporters.

All in all, for the Philippines to achieve liberation and become men and women for others, integral evangelization is essential. Father Romero’s example can also be a powerful tool in the realization of this goal. Again, reiterating Father Arrupe’s statement, it is difficult, but not impossible.