

Headline: The Unwanted

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The rains are here, and so are the floods. There are reasons why many believe that climate change is causing such a disruption in our weather patterns. It matters less if these are really new patterns or a natural part of an old pattern that we just never knew before. What is important is that at least three generations of living Filipinos know there are dramatic changes in our weather today versus remembered yesteryears.

Who is right and who is wrong among scientific views does not make it less miserable for Filipinos deeply affected by the emerging climate changes. And I am not talking about the inconvenienced by heavy traffic in flooded streets, I am talking about life-and-death circumstances for millions. I am talking about poor Filipinos, the poorest 5 million families and presumably another 2 or 3 million almost as poor families. Yes, let's talk about them.

Many who read my articles do not see and relate to the poor in the provinces and rural areas. These same many, though, see and hear about the poor in the urban areas, especially Metro Manila. This is simply because the Internet is better in the cities than they are in most municipalities, and because media more regularly covers highly urbanized areas more than less populated rural areas. Until a Sendong or a Pablo comes along to kill hundreds or thousands.

For those who are aware of the caste system of India, they know there is a group at the very bottom called the "Untouchables". For those less aware, let me quote a short description from national Geographic:

"To be born a Hindu in India is to enter the caste system, one of the world's longest surviving forms of social stratification. Embedded in Indian culture for the past 1,500 years, the caste system follows a basic precept: All men are created unequal. The ranks in Hindu society come from a legend in which the main groupings, or varnas, emerge from a primordial being. From the mouth come the Brahmins—the priests and teachers. From the arms come the Kshatriyas—the rulers and soldiers. From the thighs come the Vaisyas—merchants and traders. From the feet come the Sudras—laborers. Each varna in turn contains hundreds of hereditary castes and subcastes with their own pecking orders.

A fifth group describes the people who are achuta, or untouchable. The primordial being does not claim them. Untouchables are outcasts—people considered too impure, too polluted, to rank as worthy beings. Prejudice defines their lives, particularly in the rural areas, where nearly three-quarters of India's people live. Untouchables are shunned, insulted, banned from temples and higher caste homes, made to eat and drink from separate utensils in public places, and, in extreme but not uncommon cases, are raped, burned, lynched, and gunned down."

It is a sad reality that we have our "Untouchables" in the Philippines. I will call them the "Unwanted" to avoid confusion with the Indian term, and also because they are truly unwanted. That is why they have remained the way they are from the beginning of the poverty they fell into during the Spanish regime – because no one cared. That devaluation they suffered from a society that preferred not to deal with them, except on temporary basis when their brawns become necessary for harvest purposes, has not been reversed for most of them.

Half of Filipinos are self-rated poor, with at least one fourth dirt poor. That is a percentage higher than the Untouchables of India. It is scandalous how this can happen when a dominant Christian religion is anchored on love and bringing glad tidings to the poor. But the truth is the truth, and no religious hypocrisy can change that. Christians can only move out of hypocrisy, especially the leadership of the Catholic Church to whom Catholics look to for modeling. I choose not to speak about the minority Muslims, knowing as I do that among the poorest in the Philippines are Muslim areas in Mindanao. Definitely, their own poor cannot be blamed.

The highlight is suddenly on the Unwanted today. Attention is focused on them when the rest of Filipinos are either inconvenienced or politicians threatened with public ire. But I notice that the attention given the Unwanted is not softened by sympathy; rather, it is laced with official frustration. After all, the Unwanted are blamed for the garbage in the esteros and rivers where there are colonies of them piled on top of one another. After all, the Unwanted are blamed for everything, as though their misery is their choice over the blessings of the more fortunate. If they are not deemed too lazy, they are called too stupid to vote for the good candidates.

As if good candidates over 100 years have amounted to anything for the Unwanted, almost 19 million of them having experienced hunger in the 1st quarter of 2013. If 19% of our poor can grow hungry and many millions more threatened by hunger everyday, do we believe they will clean their garbage, or clean our garbage for us? Do we expect them to live in subdivisions instead of river banks or esteros so they can be close to water, no matter how polluted? If we do not want them, why will they want us?

We have choices, the Unwanted do not. We can stoop down, they cannot reach up enough to reach us. The gap is too big. We can sympathize and empathize, we can afford to. They are too busy trying to survive and cannot even think of joining a revolution to get rid of us.

When we look at the Unwanted as the problem, we cannot solve anything. Because we are the problem, not them. They are the Unwanted, unwanted by us. Their only dream to have a little of what we have, including being wanted. If our Christianity is too cold to care, maybe the Filipino in us can be the spark to make us brave enough to care.

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