

Headline: A king's advice

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One night recently there was an authoritative pounding on the door of our office in Tacloban City. Everyone else was sleeping, so I went down to see who it was. There was more pounding before I got to the door—someone was in a big hurry. When I opened the door I found a thin old man with a scraggly beard and a golden crown on his head.

“Are you Murphy?” he asked.

“I am, and who are you?”

He didn't bother to answer that, but said: “I like you, Murphy. I read your articles, I want to give you now some good advice.” He looked around. “Is there any place to sit?”

I took him inside, led him to the kitchen table, and offered him coffee.

He took off his crown and put it on the table between us. Its sunset-gold color had the look of centuries. It sat there as though listening to our conversation.

“Now, young man, tell me: Who are the Church's greatest enemies?” He sat back, ready to judge my answer.

“The unequal, exclusive economies we have everywhere in the world,” I said.

“Good answer. The bankers, in other words. They were just starting in my day. They grew strong in the cities and now they rule the world.”

We talked some more. “So, Murphy, our No. 1 enemies are not the Muslims, or Mother Nature and climate change, or...” He trailed off and began to laugh. “Don't mind me, I'm remembering some of my friends in the Church from years ago who thought women were the No. 1 enemy of God's Holy Church. Imagine that. Had they no mothers or sisters?”

Our visitor cleared his throat and told me why he was in Tacloban in our office: “My countryman, President François Hollande, was here in your country recently to raise concern about climate change and a meeting he intends to host later this year. I'm here to urge you to ignore him.

I have nothing against Hollande or climate change, but I say, not now. His voice rose as he went along, and I was afraid he would wake the others asleep upstairs.

“Here is why I oppose a big effort now on climate change,” the man said. “One, we still haven't fed all the hungry children or given every family a dry, clean place to live. We should finish these things first. Second, it is only when we have organized poor people to solve these very concrete issues that we will have people who will be able to make their own analysis of the changes needed to deal with climate change, and to choose what roles they will play. If we don't have organized groups of poor people to do this, the rich and powerful, the bankers, will throw them under the bus when they negotiate. I heard that phrase about the bus in the Bronx. Do you know the Bronx?”

"I grew up there," I said.

"A very wise place," he said, and patted my shoulder in admiration. "Thirdly, Murphy, I'm afraid the bankers' choice of disasters to worry about may not include those that poor people wish to work on—fires, for example. Fires, as you know well, are the No. 1 disaster for urban poor people, but they are not officially recognized as disasters on many government lists. How do you expect poor people to work on rising sea levels, which is a matter of centimeters per year, when you don't try to end fires that wipe out whole settlements in a single night?"

He was out of breath when he finished. Then he asked: "Would you have wine?"

"We do but it's not very good."

"There's no such thing as a bad wine," he told me.

I poured two glasses and we toasted each other. "They say 'Mabuhay' here," I told him.

"Mabuhay," he replied. He seemed happier, but he wasn't finished talking. "Climate change is serious business, but for politicians it is just one more issue they can use to increase their popularity. Climate change is the current soup of the day of political leaders. For them, it is a way to avoid making the basic and difficult changes that would really help the poor. Our politicians have forgotten the Millennium Goals, for example. Don't jump on the climate change-disaster risk reduction bandwagon."

Then he talked about a time when he was captured by Muslims. "I became king of France when I was 20. I was an arrogant young man, but I was captured by the Muslims near Tunis on my first crusade. I spent months as a prisoner, and it changed me. We, the Muslims and the Jews all believe in a merciful God, the same God. Think of that—the same God hears the same prayers from all of us."

My guest, I realized, was Louis IX, king of France in the 13th century—the "greatest of centuries," according to some historians. One hundred poor people had dinner with him every day in his palace near Notre Dame Cathedral. He wasn't perfect. He forced Jews to convert and he burned their holy books, including the Talmud, until the Pope ordered him to stop. He was declared a saint not long after his death.

He put on his crown and headed to the door. He called back: "Strong people's organizations first, then climate change. Stop fires first."

He was an unusual man, but I wonder about his ideas.

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