**CONQUERING EVIL WITH GOOD**

CBCP PASTORAL STATEMENT

*“Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.”* (Romans 12:21)

Our dear People of God,

Peace be with you. We are aware that many of you have been wondering why your bishops have kept a collective silence over many disturbing issues, about which you may have felt you urgently needed our spiritual and pastoral guidance. Forgive us for the length of time that it took us to find our collective voice. We too needed to be guided properly in prayer and discernment before we could guide you.

RESPONDING WITH SILENCE

For the past few months now, we have observed how the culture of violence has gradually prevailed in our land. The recent bombing of the cathedral of Jolo where scores of people were killed and several more were injured is a further evidence to the cycle of hate that is destroying the moral fabric of our country. Lately, we have also been on the receiving end of cruel words that pierce into the soul of the Catholic Church like sharp daggers. From deep within, the body of Christ is crying out in anguish as he did to Saul of Tarsus on his way to Damascus. (Acts 9:4) We have silently noted these painful instances with deep sorrow and prayed over them. We have taken our cue from Pope Francis who tells us that in some instances, “…the best response is silence and prayer.”

FAITH: OUR PEOPLE’S SOURCE OF STRENGTH

We respect the freedom of conscience and religion of people of other faiths, including former Catholic Christians who may have already renounced their faith. We also respect the freedom of expression of our fellow citizens in this country, including their personal opinions about faith and religion. But as far as we know, the freedom of expression does not include a license to insult other people’s faith, especially our core beliefs. We know that this cuts deeply into the souls of our people—especially the poor, because faith is the only thing they have to hold on to. It gives them hope and strength to continue living and working despite all the odds that come their way. It sustains them when they feel alone and defenseless in foreign lands where they work.

When people do not understand our essential doctrines as Roman Catholic Christians, we have also ourselves to blame. It could also mean we have failed in our preaching. Perhaps we have not been effective enough in our catechesis about the faith? Perhaps we should find better and more appropriate ways of communicating the faith. Our preparation for the celebration of the 500th year of Christianity in the Philippines could serve as a perfect opportunity to embark on a renewed integral evangelization in word and witness.

ADMITTING OUR SHORTCOMINGS

Like the leaders and members of any other human institution, no doubt, we, your bishops and priests have our own share of failures and shortcomings as well. We have already mentioned in our previous statement that “we bow in shame when we hear of abuses committed by some of (us)...”, that “we hold ourselves accountable for their actions, and accept our duty to correct them...”

NOT AGAINST FIGHTING ILLEGAL DRUGS

There are people who, perhaps out of concern for us, have warned us about being critical of the government’s fight against illegal drugs. Perhaps we need to make ourselves clear about this issue. We are not against the government’s efforts to fight illegal drugs. We do respect the fact that it is the government’s duty to maintain law and order and to protect its citizens from lawless elements. We have long acknowledged that illegal drugs are a menace to society and that their easier victims are the poor. Like most other Filipinos we had high hopes that the government would truly flex some political will to be able to use the full force of the law in working against this terrible menace. It was when we started hearing of mostly poor people being brutally murdered on mere suspicion of being small-time drug users and peddlers while the big-time smugglers and drug lords went scot-free, that we started wondering about the direction this “drug war” was taking.

As bishops, we have no intention of interfering in the conduct of State affairs. But neither do we intend to abdicate our sacred mandate as shepherds to whom the Lord has entrusted his flock. We have a solemn duty to defend our flock, especially when they are attacked by wolves (!) We do not fight with arms. We fight only with the truth. Therefore, no amount of intimidation or even threat to our lives will make us give up our prophetic role, especially that of giving voice to the voiceless. As Paul once said, “Woe to me if I don’t preach the Gospel!” (1 Cor 9:16)

GOD’S IMAGE AND LIKENESS

Our faith informs us that no human being in this world deserves to be treated as a “non-human”, not even the mentally ill, or those born with disabilities. This is consistent with our defense of the right to life even of the unborn, because we believe that all human beings are creatures in God’s image and likeness, imbued with an innate dignity. We also must consider the right to life of people who are brutally murdered just because they are suspected of being opponents of government, as well as those who are summarily executed by armed groups. Everyone in the civilized community of nations would agree that even those who may have committed criminal offenses should be treated in a humane way, even as justice demands that they be held accountable for their actions.

SAVE THE CHILDREN

There is no way we can call ourselves a civilized society if we hold children in conflict with the law criminally liable. Children who get involved in crimes, such as those who are used as

runners by adult drug pushers, do not deserve to be treated as criminals; they are victims that need to be rescued. It is obvious that most children in conflict with the law come from very poor families and were born and raised in an environment of abuse. We beg our country’s legislators to give the bills they are drafting some serious rethinking and consider the greater harm that such a move can cause on the young people of our country. We commend the initiatives to improve the *Bahay-Pag-asa* shelters for the care of children in conflict with the law.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF MERCY

Being civilized is not just about more advanced technology and infrastructure but about being more humane to the poor, the weak, the disadvantaged, the elderly, the children, those with special needs and all those who tend to be left out in society. We are not just creatures endowed with intelligence and guided by the evolutionary instincts of “survival of the fittest”. What makes us more superior as creatures is not our impulse to dominate each other but our innate sensitivity and capacity to love, to respect, to care for one another, to be both just and merciful, to be compassionate, to build community and to be genuinely concerned about the common good. The law of retaliation that demands “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (Exodus 21:24) has long been repudiated in Christian tradition. As Christians, we have to learn the way of Jesus who says, “Be merciful, just as [also] your Father is merciful.”(Luke 6:36)

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More than ever, as members of the Church, we must realize that our strength lies in keeping our communities of faith intact. We must educate the faithful in the application of their conscience to the complex and myriad problems of life — in the choice of leaders, in the exercise of their vocation as citizens, in the raising of families, in their work and chosen professions, in the efforts to care for the environment, etc. Our faith must try to hold these different aspects of life together into an integral whole — letting conscience speak its wisdom consistently in every aspect of our life.

Finally, we reiterate what we said in the previous statement that “the battles that we fight are spiritual.” (Ephesians 6:10-17). In the midst of spiritual warfare, St. Peter admonishes us to “be sober and alert” especially when the enemy attacks “like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.” (1 Peter 5:8) As members of God’s flock, we must learn to be brave, to stick together, and look after one another. Let this moment be a time to pray, to be strong, wise, and committed. Let this be also a teaching moment for us all—a moment for relearning the core beliefs, principles and values of our faith, and what it means to be a Catholic Christian at this time.

For the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines:

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