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Proclaiming Liberty to Captives

Francisco F. Claver

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Proclaiming Liberty to Captives*

FRANCISCO F. CLAVER

THE PROCLAIMER

The phrase *global village* is one on which we may conveniently hang the subject of our discussion – the Church's role in the promotion of justice and peace, of development and liberation in the world today; her specific contribution to the creation of a better world. For before we can ask what the Church is supposed to do, we have to first consider what that world is that is to be made better. The idea of the "global village," I think, is as good a concept as any to start with.

It is a happy phrase, pregnant with promise and meaning, yet for that very reason elusive, frustrating. For the reality it connotes *is* and *is not* at the same time. *It is* – because in a very true sense the world we live in has shrunk tremendously, and nations and peoples are neighbor to one another in a way that was not possible in ages past. All this, thanks to modern means of communication. But at the same time, *it is not* – because the implications of that very neighborliness are still not understood, its potentials unrealized. And it seems to me it is this very problem of our world, being and not being a global village, that the Church must confront. That very confronting will help define for us the role of the Church that we are interested in here.

For the term *global village* describes in a shorthand way what is wrong and what is right about our world today. The developed nations seem to have too much of the "global" in them – and this is their strength as well as their weakness. The underdeveloped nations, on the contrary, are too much "village" – and this too is

*This paper, originally prepared for the meeting of the Irish Theological Association in Dublin in January 1977, could not be delivered by its author, due to the refusal of the Philippine government to grant him an exit permit. It is published here in slightly abridged form. –EDITOR'S NOTE.

their strength *and* weakness. These are over-generalizations, of course, but there is a grain of truth in them somewhere which can bear an attempt at further explication for the purpose we have in mind.

The Western world, the developed nations, have too much of the "global": I am thinking not only of political and economic power, the overt political imperialism of the past, the economic stranglehold of the present that they possess, world-embracing both, people-crushing; but I am thinking also, and more especially, of such problems as arise from what social scientists call mass-cultures, production-line societies, and their attendant problems: a general aimlessness about life, depersonalization, ennui, a surfeit of wealth or a preoccupation with its increase, the big city, urbanization gone wild, etc.

The underdeveloped nations, on their part, have too much of the "village": they are bogged down by tradition, hampered by struggles for power among petty kings and chieftains, too engrossed in internal problems to be able to see, or get involved in the wider problems around them, economically and politically dependent, struggling to get out of their colonial past yet forever falling into the mistakes of that same past, etc.

We could continue to catalogue the differences of these two worlds of development, draw up their contrasting features and set them against each other in an almost infinite series. But whatever we come up with, I am afraid both worlds suffer from the same problem: myopia and selfishness.

BISA 1974

That is probably the generalization of generalizations. Let it be that — for the moment. Here I would like to go a little into the underpinnings of this judgement, trite and simplistic as it may seem.

Back in February and March of 1974, the first Bishops' Institute of Social Action (BISA) — a program worked out by the Office of Human Development under the Federation of Asian Bishops (FABC) — was held in the Philippines. The Institute was geared toward making bishops critically aware of social realities, toward helping them to face up to social problems later in their own respective dioceses and countries. It was an international gathering of

bishops and a sprinkling of priests and religious, 40 in all, from Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

The Institute lasted for two weeks. Without going into all the steps, early in the first week we did zero-in on modes of development. At one point the question was starkly posed this way: "Would not the development that we are speaking of here be tantamount to making our people simply more selfish?" Nobody was more startled by the question as it evolved from their own searching than the bishops themselves. A good number of us were Southeast Asians. The diversity of cultures we represented was certainly great, but if there was one aspect of Southeast Asian cultures that we could say was common to all of them, it would be the high valuation of family and the consequent emphasis on interdependence. Development would, it seems, run counter to these values. For the model of development that is being followed willy-nilly in most countries of Southeast Asia is a Western one, strongly capitalistic, almost exclusively profit-oriented. Could we accept a model that for all practical purposes meant rampant selfishness, stemming from what was in effect a shortsighted economic vision that saw only as far as one's profits allowed him to see?

In further discussions we came to a consensus that some kind of socialism would have to figure prominently in whatever models we would ultimately decide on. At this point in the Institute, I must say the Chinese experience gripped us in a fascination that most of us had never felt before. Toward the end the question became: can we help bring about a better world for the masses of Southeast Asia following the Chinese model, but without the repression of basic human rights and the sacrifice of lives that we associate with Mao's reforming experiment? Was there an Indonesian or Cambodian or Burmese or Thai or Filipino way of development, respecting our diverse cultural identity, yet thoroughly Christian (or Muslim or Buddhist)? And in this Christian and ethnic model, in consideration of Maoist China's example, was there a place for Marxism?

We asked that question in 1974. We still are asking it. Meanwhile events are passing us by. South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia are now under Communist rule. Dire prognostications are being made about Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, even about the Philippines turning Communist in a matter of years. And we continue to

speculate and argue among ourselves whether one can be Christian and Marxist at the same time. (Somehow no one talks about whether one can be Christian and Capitalist in the same manner.) It seems this is all we are allowed to do as Church. We can speculate all we want, but the premises of our speculation are already set. By official Rome, that is. We can speculate; but no, we cannot act on the fruits of our speculation (even within the narrow limits set for us by our "official" theology). Acting would be politics, and the Church does not engage in politics.

THE PHILIPPINE SITUATION

Let me bring this whole discussion down to a more concrete level. I speak of the Philippine situation, a very particular case, true, but in many ways representative of other Southeast Asian nations and the Church in that region.

A hard issue at this very moment — both to the Church and government, to the people at large too — is the role religious and bishops have been playing in the political sphere. For the past four years, the country has been under martial law (an unsubtle attempt at subtlety to invest a dictatorship with the trappings of constitutionality). Practically every human and civil right has been thrown overboard — or at least has suffered in some way — in the name of the "emergency," which, believe it or not, has been invoked to develop a new society of Filipinos. The bishops as a whole have been relatively silent. They have issued statements, it is true, on the general political situation, but their statements have been by and large just that — statements. The religious superiors, on the other hand, both men and women, have as an Association taken the bishops' statements seriously and over the years have tried to put them into programmed action. They have been quite effective. So there has been conflict since — with the bishops and with the government.

Last year in May or June the Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines (AMRSP) received a strong reprimand from the Congregation of Religious in Rome, castigating them for their "exclusively sociopolitical orientation." This year they received another letter, even stronger than the last, this time from two Roman Congregations: that of Bishops and of Religious.

The point at issue seems to be this: To what extent can religious

and priests — the institutional Church, that is — involve themselves in the political sphere?

It is a bothersome question. If we would go by traditional Church action, we have an answer of sorts: When government tampers with sexual morality — pushes, for instance, a population control program that makes extensive use of artificial means of preventing conception or seeks to liberalize divorce laws — the Church speaks out as a matter of course, does everything in its power to safeguard the purity of its teachings on human sexuality. There is a second instance: When government tries to enact legislation prejudicial to Church institutions — schools, hospitals, seminaries, convents, etc. — it cries out in the name of religious freedom. Nobody brings in the objection then that we, the Church, are meddling in political affairs. If the AMRSP had made this their answer, I doubt they would ever have been privileged to receive those letters from Rome.

But is this answer enough? Is it an answer at all? I do not think so. It would effectively reduce the Gospel merely to sexual morality and to the preservation of institutional relics, however good these are in themselves. What about justice, social and individual, and the protection of human rights? What about the humane exercise of government itself, the rightful use of political power? What about economic development and the equitable sharing in its fruits? And lastly, what about the integration of all these into what we all too glibly call total human development? I wonder — would you also get letters from Rome if you started to involve yourselves in these questions?

THE BISHOPS OF THE PHILIPPINES

There is a group of people in the Philippines who have been supportive of the AMRSP but who, at least until recently, had not received any letters of warning from Rome: bishops. Seventeen of them, out of a total of 76 or so active pastors of dioceses, recently came out with a document of their own in which they set forth what they had thought out together to be the rationale of their political involvement. Allow me to quote at length from the text of their statement on this very subject. For I think it does set forth, in a rather succinct and orderly manner, what our current thinking in the Philippines is on the subject at hand:

A. *Our Notion of the Church.* We start with our notion of the Church. For in the final analysis the different approaches we take with regard to martial law and its dictatorial form of government comes down to how we understand the Church, even more crucially, how we operate pastorally from this basic understanding.

To us the Church is not only *Institution*, jealous of its authority, of its prerogatives and rights. It is also *People* – the People of God, the Community of Believers. It is easy enough to accept this definition – as it is easy to accept the documents of Vatican II from which the definition is drawn, in which it is enshrined. It is not too easy making it a living reality. For if we are serious about the people part of our definition, we will have to pay more attention to their life situation, to their life problems, to events that help – or do not help – them to live a more human and Christian life. We do not deny the supremacy that the spiritual must have in the life of Christians. But accepting that supremacy does not mean either that we neglect the physical. The Church is people, not simply souls, disembodied, incorporeal. The Church is living men and women, flesh and blood, of the existential present. It is they who must live – and give witness to – the Gospel in the concrete realities of the Philippines today. Our preaching must take in those concrete realities.

B. *Our Political Involvement.* Hence our concern with martial law and what it is doing to our people. This concern, we are told, is none of our business. Martial law, dictatorial regimes, the running of government – these are political matters, alien to preachers of the Gospel, outside of their competence as men of the cloth. We disagree.

It is a paradox, but it seems to us that the less involved in politics the Church professes to be, the more it is actually involved – but in a way that is most detrimental to its primary task of preaching the Gospel. For silence can mean condoning political oppression. We cannot conceive of a Church that preaches a Gospel which has nothing whatsoever to tell people in the political aspects of their life.

Affirming this, we are not advocating the entry of ourselves as Churchmen into politics pure and simple, into the wheeling and dealing of politicians, into the maneuverings for power that characterize the political arena. But there are moral dimensions to the art and practice of government, and we as Church must at all times be ready to preach the principles of those moral dimensions. It is a fact that under the restrictive conditions of martial law, we, as pastors of our flocks, have grown in our understanding of our pastoral role in regard to the political aspects of the life of our people. And we see clearly, it is not Christian for us to remain apolitical.

C. *Human Rights and Working for Justice.* It is in the area of human rights and justice especially that we see the un-Christian nature of non-

involvement. For the sad fact is, under martial law in the Philippines, our people have been deprived of rights that are theirs simply because they are human: rights to freedom of speech, of association; rights to due process, to meaningful participation in decision-making processes touching their common welfare; rights to truth and information; rights even to their dignity as thinking men and women. In the government's frenetic drive towards economic development, these rights are of secondary importance. This we believe is a massive injustice, compounded by deceit and wholesale manipulation of people, by the dehumanizing fear that comes with the power of the gun.

In this immoral tampering with the lives of millions, should we as pastors be silent? Should we not "rock the boat" on the plea that we are to engage in politics? Or, base thought, because in speaking out, we will be losing privileges accorded the Church by the State; we will be endangering the continuance of our traditional institutions — schools, hospitals, radio stations,* other apostolic projects?

D. *Church Pronouncements.* We believe the answer is a resounding NO. It cannot be otherwise. We have our very words as a Conference to go on. Our many statements over the years on social questions point clearly in a definite direction of deep social concern and involvement. We have the FABC statement of Taipei in 1974 and its call for a "dialogue of life" with the peoples of Asia. We have the ringing declaration of the Asian Bishops Meeting in Manila in 1970 and its brave stand of fighting injustice wherever, whenever, by whomsoever it is committed. We have the statement on human rights of the Synod of 1974 and the document on justice in the world of the Synod of 1971. We have Papal pronouncements galore from *Evangelii Nuntiandi* to *Populorum Progressio*, and even farther back to *Mater et Magistra*. And, finally, we have the documents of Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* and *Lumen Gentium* especially, with the full authority of the Council behind them . . .

E. *Our Credibility.* From what we have said above about our notion of Church, about political involvement, about human rights and justice, we answer: . . . we take seriously the social teachings of the Church. We do mean the words we have spoken ourselves as a Conference of Bishops. And we try to translate them into pastoral programs which speak to people directly where they are. It is only thus, in our suiting of deeds to words, that our message will have meaning for ourselves and our people.

But precisely because we try to put beautiful words into effective execution, we become "destroyers of the peace," "sowers of the seeds of discord." We fear the greatest problem facing the Church today in its task

*One month after this paper was written, on 22 January 1977, the radio station of Bishop Claver's Prelature of Malaybalay, as well as that of the Prelature of Tagum, Davao Oriental, were closed by the government. —EDITOR'S NOTE.

of evangelization is its general lack of credibility as a witness to the Gospel. And we, Bishops of the Philippines, are not helping towards the filling of that lack. We say one thing. We do another. Or at least we are content to confine our preaching to the pulpit. We are afraid to descend to where our people live their lives — the marketplace, the highways and by-ways, the farms and barrios. We wonder if this is what the Synod of 1974 and *Evangelii Nuntiandi* mean by "integral evangelization."

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

As the bishops themselves say, their thinking on the question of the Church's involvement in political questions is the fruit not only of speculation but of actual pastoral practice in their own dioceses. Their reasoning is cyclic. They start out with their notion of what Church is. Accepting the Church as People of God as well as institution, they assert the need to be concerned with the life problems of people. In the Philippines, issues of justice and human rights and inequitable development loom large among those life problems. Hence their full involvement in them. They cite current Church pronouncements supporting such involvement and end with the notion of Church again, but this time with soul-searching questions about her credibility as a witness of the Gospel.

The 17 bishops who co-signed the statement give their own perception of what their role — and by extension the role of the Church as a whole, at least in the Philippines — is in the area of justice and development. And they speak of it under the rubric of political involvement. This involvement, they claim (and they are only too aware that this very claim can be contested by those who disagree with their approach), is an imperative arising from the Church's primary task of preaching the Gospel.

In view of this preaching role, we can take a closer look at the involvement the bishops are speaking of, but now cast it in terms of role functions. We can isolate four: annunciation, denunciation, initiation, and support. Let me explain briefly what is meant by each term. In all this, I will be taking the Church to mean the institutional Church.

Annunciation. Announcing the Gospel and its message of salvation in Christ Jesus is something everyone will accept as the main mission of the Church. But this Gospel must be preached in its entirety, and in its entirety it has profound implications for all

aspects of human living — political, economic, social, cultural, etc. — not simply for what we tend to narrowly define as the spiritual part of man, his soul. Hence we speak of total human development, of integral evangelization, of full liberation — rich concepts all, and interlocking. We have no trouble accepting them on an intellectual level. But speaking them out in all their fullness, in all their power?

Denunciation. The function of denouncing acts and ideas that militate against the development of peoples in accordance with Gospel principles is something we tend to consign to vinegar-tongued prophets of the type of Savonarola. (We also burn them at the stake figuratively and not too figuratively.) Yet it is a task that is as necessary as the one of announcing. These two tasks complement each other. Denunciation is something that comes hard to us Southeast Asians — for cultural reasons: direct confrontation is alien to most of us; the indirect approach is our way, so we are told. True enough. But just as true is the constant need, as long as we are sinners, of the task of denouncing. Somehow we have not yet learned to denounce — indirectly.

Initiation. Initiating action for justice and development is probably the hardest — and the fuzziest — of the role functions we are discussing here. The stock objection to the Church's entry into this kind of action is that the areas of politics and economics, the hubs around which developmental problems revolve, are the layman's proper spheres, not the cleric's; and the principle of subsidiarity must be strictly followed in this instance. The problem is we can come up with all sorts of distinctions and subdistinctions about lay and clerical roles, but when we are faced with concrete realities, for instance, of paralyzing fear, of seemingly hopeless structures, of institutionalized injustice and oppression — and of people in the grip of all these — what do we do? Especially in a sociocultural situation, such as ours, where the Church is looked up to; is expected to lead? For the moment our approach has been quite pragmatic: *solvitur ambulando*. The need of the moment is to initiate action because nobody else does. So we act. We believe that is rationale enough — and it is deeply Gospel.

Support. Where initiatives for justice and development are already being taken, defining the Church's role in terms of support is easy enough. But what I have in mind here is not just any kind of supportive action but one that is *programmatic*: action that is well-

thought-out and planned, for the execution of which the Church is willing to stick her neck out, at the disposal of which she is willing to put her resources in genuine Gospel service. Are we capable of this kind of support? Those who try to give it, strangely, are immediately tagged Communists – both within and without the Church.

There probably are other functions. And certainly there are other ways of looking at the Church's role. Also, the four functions discussed above may not be distinct at all. But whatever addition or subtraction, denial or modification, is to be made about these basic ideas, any Church role-definition must include people-action. In talking of the four functions above, we limited ourselves to the role of the Church as institution. The impression may have been given that in our scheme of things people are the *objects* of evangelization, of liberation and development. Not at all. People are and must be the *subjects* of all we have been talking about here: they too must announce, they too must denounce, initiate, support; they too must preach the Gospel, witness to the Gospel. I think this is what Church as people means.

Hence the importance of first defining what Church is all about. For only if we have an idea – a working definition – of who we are, what we are, will we be able to ask what we can do, what we can give – and why. The 17 bishops who wrote the statement I quoted from earlier were most conscious of this fact and they started out with the very general notion of Church as People of God. What does it really mean?

I do not know, except in a very general way, what theologians today are evolving in the area of ecclesiology. But those of us in pastoral work – and pastoral work among impoverished masses of people – do propose that any definition of the Church, at least among people laboring under crushing poverty, must take cognizance of these elements:

- a) a concern for and an involvement in the problems and affairs of men;
- b) a positive sharing in their struggles to achieve their hopes and aspirations for a full human life;
- c) a view of man as a total being in whom physical needs are not merely something to be tolerated in the light of what is narrowly conceived of as his spiritual needs; hence
- d) a concept of salvation which takes in human existence in all its aspects and involves it fully in the process of *metanoia*; and, finally,

- e) a preaching that reaches into the very depths of man's humanity and challenges him to live the Gospel in a total, integrated way, no matter what the external and internal constraints are to such a living. In short, Church is people attempting to live the mystery of the Risen Lord with all its implications for everything that is human; it is not merely a set of static relationships which we call the institutional Church.*

TOWARD THE NEW CREATION

I would like to return to the idea we started out with: the *global village*. I believe it is a very Christian concept, and if we have used the term earlier to put in sharp contrasts the differences between two great worlds of development, we can use it too as the one unitive concept that can and must give meaning to any development scheme in any country, no matter what the level of (economic) development it finds itself in. For the global village is indeed a new creation, and toward this new creation the Church has a great deal to contribute.

That contribution, specific to the Church — I can only think of it in terms of a *vision*. A vision that springs from the Gospel and keeps returning to the Gospel for clearer and clearer focusing. Yet also a vision that must be discovered by every generation, in each local Church, and worked out according to their special genius as a people. A vision that must lead to action by people, for people, with people. A vision to be realized and elaborated further in life, ever evolving into a more and more genuine incarnation of Christ in history.

In the final analysis, is this what our "involvement" is all about? And is it the only corrective of the myopic selfishness that we noted earlier is general among most peoples today? If so, we as Church are failing somewhere.

THE LIBERTY OF CAPTIVES

It is a strange fact, and it bothers us no end, that committed Christians in many countries of Southeast Asia who take the social teachings of the Church at face value and, more significantly, try to act on them, are immediately pilloried as Communists or Com-

*Taken in slightly modified form from the author's article on "The Church, Government and Development," *Impact* (April 1976), p. 134.

munist sympathizers. Often by churchmen too. It is a sad pass we are in. We can worry about relatively piddling things like clerical garb, Communion in the hands, correct liturgical vestments and gestures, other suchlike minutiae, but not about unjust wages, government by decree, farcical referendums, lack of due process, torture of prisoners, events that affect people's lives most intensely. Or, we may worry about these, but we may not concern ourselves with them to the point of acting. This lack of fit between what we say are our concerns as Church and what we do about those concerns forces many a real Christian to join the rebels in the hills. And wondering, we come up with solutions like more dialogue with Communists (so long as we do not get caught talking with them!), more analysis of their methods, more research into their mentality, etc. But not radical solutions like doing something about the social conditions on which Communism thrives.

We noted very briefly above that the Church's main contribution to the making of a better world and the attainment of justice and peace, could well be in providing men with a vision that comes from the Gospel. The suggestion was vague, I admit, couched in very general terms. Can we specify this vision more concretely, bring it down to a level of description and discourse that directly lends itself to *praxis*? I do not know if we can. I only know we should. However, as we suggested earlier, this vision must be worked out anew by each generation, by each people. It is perhaps best then to delineate, not a particular form of the Gospel vision, but the process — or at least some ingredients in the process — at arriving at a *common* vision. I stress the word "common," because if this vision we speak of is to be effective, it must be *shared*, at least by the people of a local Church.

It is this fact that makes me, to be frank about it, rather wary of ideologies and ideologues. I trust we will be able to make ourselves a little clearer about the underlying premises of this bias (it is admittedly a bias) in what follows. I would like to simply point out here, then, something that may be causing some wonderment, namely, that we have not bothered to make the "proper" distinctions between development and liberation, for instance, or push for one ideology over another (like socialism over capitalism). This may seem surpassing strange in view of our insistence on the need of a vision, of programmatic action, of people-involvement.

Paradoxically, this is the very reason I say I am wary of ideo-

logies and their champions. For an ideology is a particular vision, a particular program of action, a particular way of people-involvement. I do not quarrel with the fact of ideology itself, with the need of ideology. But I do with the *usual* manner with which ideological visions are forced-shared. Hence our concern with process.

THE ATTITUDES OF LIBERTY

Let me begin by setting forth briefly what I believe should be basic attitudes on the part of the Church — the official Church, principally — in the fulfilment of her role vis-a-vis development and liberation. Since our theme is liberation theology, let us call these “the attitudes of liberty.” There is more to them than mere nomenclature. I will speak of only two: the attitude of trust and the attitude of learning, simple enough ideas but quite upsetting, I am afraid, of many a current mind-set.

Trust. The Church must begin to trust people, to really believe in *their* basic good sense. I do not by any means limit this “good sense” to practical matters, to areas which we readily (or should I say grudgingly?) concede are theirs by role and competence. I also include the once sacrosanct fields of ecclesiastical elites — theologians and philosophers, spiritual writers and, yes, even canon lawyers. For too long we have provided all the answers for the people, we have done all the thinking for them. It is time they begin to come up with answers of their own, to think on their own. The point is the People of God are not a blank mass, unthinking, uncritical, unable to grasp, let alone deal with, the more abstruse points, say, of high theologizing. They are not theologians, true, certainly not of the type who staff the Holy Office. But neither are they so prone to heresy and error without our enlightened guidance. They do have some answers of their own. The problem is: Can we trust them? Can we accept their answers? Can we trust from them?

Learning. This brings us to our other attitude — the attitude of learning. The Church that trusts should, by the very fact, be also a Church that learns. From the people, that is. It seems we have stressed too much in the past our teaching role: only, we bishops can safeguard purity of doctrine, only we can untangle and interpret for our people the fine subtleties of doctrinal orthodoxy? I wonder.

It seems we have forgotten that complementary to teaching is learning — even for the Holy Roman Catholic Church.

The bishops of Asia, in the last meeting of the FABC in April 1974, speak of a “dialogue of life” with their respective peoples. If they are serious about this dialogue, the most elementary interpretation I would give their words is this: that they are open to the possibility of being taught by the people; that they believe there are insights into life, gleaned from the people’s profound ancestral wisdom, that they can learn from them for a richer interpretation of the Gospel. This requires great depths of humility from us, teachers of the truth; and genuine faith too that the Spirit does indeed breathe not only in the hierarchy but in the people as well.

In this connection I often wonder what we, theologians especially, mean when we say that the *sensus fidelium* [sense of the faithful] is a valid theological source. I fear we give this source the lowest place in our catalogue of theological proofs. It is time we give it the pride of place it deserves. For I firmly believe this *sensus* — I equate it with that basic good sense I spoke of earlier but now fully suffused with faith — has much to do with the fashioning of the vision we are talking about here.

To give a concrete example by way of illustration of the above: As in many dioceses, especially in the southern part of the Philippines, we have been pushing hard for the development of lay leaders to be the catalysts in our work of fostering basic Christian communities. These men, depending on the *trust* their respective pastors are ready to give them, perform tasks in their communities (centered on the village chapel): baptizing, preaching, distributing Communion, conducting services of the word on Sundays, etc., tasks that used to be the sole prerogatives of the priest. But in addition to these, they also perform less “churchy” functions in the community in the general attempt to integrate life and faith in a more intimate manner than tradition has allowed us to so far.

Two months ago our lay leaders met for a whole day evaluation of their efforts on a diocesan-wide level. (This is part of their ongoing program of training.) I sat in on some of their sessions. What I witnessed was not exactly unexpected, but I never fail to marvel nonetheless at the quality and depth of thinking that goes on among people that theological manuals (of an age past, I hope) used to refer to as *rudes*, the uncultured. These lay leaders were

mostly men of the soil, farming folk, hardened with toil, poor. They were considering recent happenings connected with martial law government and issues raised by those very happenings, more specifically, the issues of freedom of conscience and the use of violence. I came away deeply impressed. Those farmers were able to discuss by themselves the fine nuances of the principle of double effect, of the lesser evil, other subtle points of moral theology, and more importantly, apply them to their own life-situation and come up with proposals for a line of action that did imply some vision of how faith and life should interpenetrate. The kind of discerning they did, I thought, would have been worthy of more professedly intellectual milieus of theologians.

Perhaps I idealize too much. Perhaps. But the incident I cite is by no means an isolated experience. It is the repeated experience too of many of my priests and religious who work closely with the people at the grassroots level — and allow themselves to learn from the latter. Mao's constantly reiterated injunction to "learn from the people" is something they have practiced as a matter of course. And this probably is the reason they are often dismissed as crypto-Maoists? But whether of Maoist origin or not, this trust in the people, this learning from them, are most necessary in the process of arriving at a Gospel-inspired vision — in fact are part of the vision itself.

THE PRAXIS OF LIBERTY

There are a number of operative concepts that are of importance in the task of vision-formation. I will limit myself to only three, all from Vatican II: *participation, dialogue, co-responsibility*. For the past half-decade or so, we in Mindanao-Sulu have been quite obsessed with these ideas. The obsession has worked wonders in the churches of the region. It has also created problems. The explanation is not hard to come by: these ideas contain in themselves dynamisms which are simply waiting to be released, dynamisms that mean much for fuller human living, hence necessarily problematic. But if they create problems too, sometimes of great magnitude, strangely these same problems have a way of becoming answers for the very questions and difficulties they pose.

Participation. The principle of participation, simply stated, means that people must have a share in the forming of decisions

that in any way touch their well-being, both as individuals and as community. Self-help, self-activity, self-organization — these are all implied in the term, as is also goal-setting. The rationale for this is simply stated too: the more people share in the process of decision-making that leads to common action, the firmer the support for the decision taken, the deeper the commitment to its execution. Quite fundamental, this principle, in literature on social change. And we have no trouble accepting its necessity in the “secular” process of development.

Somehow we are not too accepting of it, Vatican II notwithstanding, in the area of Church life. For among other things, it calls into question traditional role-structuring within the Church of bishops, priests, religious, laity. Or perhaps it is not so much a matter of questioning as of redefining roles — and putting life and reality to them as they have been redefined.

Dialogue. The redefinition we have in mind can only take place meaningfully in a Church-in-dialogue, and this brings us to our second principle. We throw the word “dialogue” around quite a bit, but I doubt much real dialogue takes place. Because if it did, the often deep polarizations we find among people, both within and without the Church, would not be so common. For by dialogue we mean people coming together, reasoning together, listening, and willing to learn from the listening, open to the possibility of new insights and influences from the people one dialogues with. I have this feeling that the polarization we have in the Church today does not come from splits between conservative and liberal elements so much as between two factions of closed-minded people, both conservatives and liberals, who cannot, will not, learn from one another. Give me conservatives and liberals who are both open-minded, in real dialogue with one another, and I can guarantee you a living Church, deeply divided at times, perhaps, but never frustratingly polarized.

From the sheerly sociological point of view, dialogue is all of a piece with the idea of participation, and their common note is *sharing*. It also denotes consensus — a prerequisite for any genuine community, especially of a pluralist nature — but a consensus that itself is open to further evolution, as circumstances change, as new data are brought in, or new perceptions developed.

Co-responsibility. Basic to the process of sharing that is participation and dialogue is the principle of shared responsibility.

People coming to a consensus, deciding on a communal act, must take responsibility for the life of their community, for the directions they choose to follow as a community. Again, it is all most commonsensical, something that people in "primitive" communities all over the world do as a matter of day-to-day living, accept as basic to their whole interaction in community.

Applying this principle closer to home — if we accept it as operational in the Church, that is — I cannot help wondering if we are willing to extend it to all areas of Church life, to test it as a real operative principle of life and thought in the Church. I am afraid it will never be really operative as long as we remain mistrustful of the capability of the rank-and-file Church to be truly responsible. For basic to the effective assuming of responsibility in any human society is a minimum of mutual trust among interacting members. We see the need for this kind of responsibility in the Church. We talk about it. But it will never be shared unless those who presently have a monopoly of it begin to actually share it. It is as simple as that.

CHURCH AS COMMUNICATION

We adverted briefly above to the fact that great, sometimes immense, problems arise when we try making the principles of participation, dialogue, and co-responsibility really work. All sorts of questions arise like: What is the bishop's role in decision-making processes in the diocese or the pastor's in the parish? Who is to judge when a communal decision springs from a false interpretation of the Gospel? Who has the final responsibility in all this?

These are valid questions. And they cannot be set aside by simply answering that these are reactions from an embattled Church: participation would be against authoritarianism; dialogue against dogmatism; co-responsibility against paternalism; and that all three *isms* are actually dominant principles of government and thought within the hierarchical Church. Rather than be bogged down in what could be futile discussions of the pros and cons of such broad generalizations, I think it would be more profitable to take a brief look at what *could* be an opening to the possibility of arriving at some answers to these questions.

I suggest we return to our notion of Church. With all the talk about models and structures, it will not hurt to propose one more:

the Church as Communication. In actuality, this is no different from the concept of Church as People of God, but there are a number of points that, I feel, may be brought out better from the viewpoint of *communication*.

Creating forums. We hardly talk about public opinion in the Church (although the *sensus fidelium* is in essence a form of such an opinion). Or if we do, we rarely think in terms of its ongoing formation, of its fostering and evolvment. Actually we do, in a way: schools, mass media, encyclicals, pastoral letters, the pulpit – these are all geared toward forming Church opinion conformed and conformable to the Gospel. This is all right as far as the *teaching* Church is concerned. But what about the *learning* Church? Communication is a two-way street. Hence there must be the possibility of *feedback*, of response to communication. This is what is largely missing.

Hence the need of creating forums. At all levels. Among every sector of Church membership. Forums that are working vehicles of communication which make it possible for people to speak up and be listened to and be taken seriously.

Vatican II was cognizant of the need. Thus the instituting of bishops' synods, priests' senates, diocesan pastoral councils, parish councils, and Church groups of all kinds. But in practice these have been forums mainly of traditional Church leaders (both clerical and lay). Many of these forums have been created, but whether they are functioning or not *as* forums is another question. The need is to make them genuinely so. And for this it is necessary to make the elemental unit of communication within the Church the basic Christian community.

Focus on people. If these communities are to become the basic units of communication, their focus will necessarily have to be the common good of the people as community, as Church: their life, their concerns, their problems. In this focusing we will include all we have said about the elements that must go into a working ecclesiology, about the role-functions of the Church, but now as People of God and not merely as institution. And this focus will itself be the starting point of the process of the people's coming to a vision of their common task in the Gospel.

In all the above we have bypassed a question that the canonically-minded insist on asking: What is the nature of these forums we speak of? At some point they will have to become decision-making

bodies; if so, will they be consultative or deliberative in nature? This question, I know full well, is being asked of the Synod of Bishops itself and other lesser conferences and councils in the Church. The trouble is when it is asked and canonical answers are given, we usually end up with *paper* synods, pastoral councils, and the like. This makes me think it is the wrong question to ask, at least at this time. If we are convinced that these forums are vital to the life of the Church at this point in history, it may well be premature trying to articulate, hence to constrict, that life in the vocabulary and limitations of a legal system that was not made for it.

At any rate, I believe we can transcend the problem if we make these forums really focus themselves on people, on people-problems, and on people-concerns. For when real communication takes place at this level of interest, decision-making follows most naturally. And the problem of competence and authority somehow solves itself.

Self-regulating mechanisms. This is by no means to opt for unrestricted freedom in the Church. Although life-concerns are wide and far-ranging, there are necessarily limits to them. Any community of men and women engaged in constant dialogic interaction will discover those limits for themselves and will act ordinarily within those same limits. This interaction, participative, dialogic, and co-responsible, will itself be the mechanism which will enable the community to regulate itself. This capacity for self-regulation — call it the “collective will” if you wish — is something that I would include for acceptance in the attitude of trust that we spoke of earlier.

Saying this, we do not preclude by any means the possibility of the community’s committing mistakes. But by the same token, we do not preclude the possibility of its correcting them when they are committed. Community consensus can go haywire at any given moment. But in progressing (or retrograding) from consensus to consensus, the community is always aware of where it is at. It may not be always aware of all the implications of its present consensus (who is, except God?), but there is always the possibility of growing in that awareness. And of changing directions from a heightened awareness.

The discerning community. What in effect have we been talking about here then is the creating of *discerning communities*: com-

munities of people who come together to talk of their problems, to seek solutions for them, to act in concert when the need for concerted action is indicated; reflecting communities, hence self-aware; likewise self-regulating and self-contained; yet for all that, outward-looking, concerned not only with themselves but with other communities and other people. And above all, communities being and acting because of the Gospel, in the light of the Gospel. If such a community is the minimal unit of the universal community that we call the Church, it is also that of the even wider community that we initially called the global village. And it is its own particular grasp of the Gospel-vision that it will contribute to the building up of the latter.

As we indicated above, the Church as communication is in reality simply another version of the People of God model. If there is anything special to it, it is its incorporation into its inner design of rich insights into the nature of communication processes from cybernetics, communications and general systems theory and the like, all fertile areas of modern scientific researching. It is a measure of the Church's general acceptance of some of the points we have been talking of here that it has allowed itself, consciously I think, to be influenced by advances in the sciences, the social sciences especially. It has always been in reality a *learning* Church, but in its dogmatizing, the fact tends to be forgotten. Or, perhaps, not often publicly acknowledged?

There are other aspects of the Church as communication that should be further elaborated, especially the fact that the Church is in its innermost being *communication*. We leave that elaboration to the professional theologians. I would only make one point here apropos of this fact: the more *internal* communication takes place within the Church, the more faithfully and convincingly it will speak out the Message of the Word. The converse, I believe, is also true.

DEVELOPMENT AND LIBERATION

I would like to conclude by returning to the theme of development and liberation. We seem to have strayed far from it by bringing into the orbit of our consideration what seem like too many extraneous topics. Not really. The fact is, since our concentration is on the role of the Church in development and liberation, and we

have defined this role in terms of vision-formation, a process, we have had to go into certain key ideas in that process. Hence the stress on the twin attitudes of trust and learning, on the acting principles of participation, dialogue, and co-responsibility, and finally on the Church itself as communication. That process, when one comes down to it, is itself *the* process of development and liberation.

Captives and liberators. For the very process of elaborating *together* a vision in the Gospel, communicating it within and outside the community, and more importantly, striving to realize it in action, in concert with others, *in* and *as* community, *is* development of peoples in a most profound and real sense. It is also liberation in an equally profound and real sense. For it is people, thinking together, responding together, acting together, who must be the agents and architects of their own individual and collective good. It is they, the *captives* in all manner of oppressive situations, who must work out their own liberty. Ideologues will come and go, prophets and kings and priests too, for that matter, all with their own modes and models of developing and liberating *others*, all with their own special visions *for* others. They all will pass away from the scene as just so many loud words, no more, no less, unless they themselves become part of the "others." Only then will they begin to speak a liberating message.

This is the reason for that wariness toward ideologies I spoke of earlier. Their liberating vision is all too often obfuscated, even denied, in the rigidly dogmatic manner in which they are presented as *the* only answers to a given situation. In the discerning-community scheme of things, ideas and programs of action, even mystiques and ideologies, must be subject to scrutiny, open to modification and change, responsive to realities as people see them at any given moment. The individual genius of the ideologue must be critically examined by the collective genius of the people, and together they must arrive at a common, if momentary, vision of *their* liberation and development. For both captives and liberators are *in it* together.

Responsiveness. The emphasis in all this is on *responsiveness*. And this in turn calls for adaptability, flexibility, even in a holy institution like the Church. In the final analysis, the acid test of any definition we come up with in regard to Church roles and functions in the struggle for man's development and liberation is

whether it does or does not carry the note of responsiveness to the deepest aspirations of people in the here and now, to their realities, to their conditions, to their lives in the flesh-and-blood present.

One final observation. Our perspective in all this, at least so I would like to think, has been a pastoral one. I say this, not in any way to condone whatever sins or heresies I may have committed in these talks, but to state a simple fact, but a most important fact. True enough, many sins are committed in the name of pastoral concern and action. But as we noted somewhere above, those very sins could well be our salvation. That sounds cryptic enough, I think. Let me end with it to keep up the image of "oriental inscrutability."