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The Free Farmers Re-examined

Jeremias U. Montemayor

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have been frittered away in harmless but pointless pleasures are now devoted to apostolic work. The Guilds' "social impact" is that these hours are pleasantly, fruitfully and *holily* occupied.

The work of propagating the Guilds, despite its remarkable growth in four years, is not without its difficulties. Chief among these is the general resistance to adopt anything new as an organized movement. Often permission to found the organization meets with the typical reply. "We already have too many Catholic organizations for women; your apostolate can be carried on by them." The rebuff stings, but I suppose we must expect it.

On the whole, however, the Guilds have fared pretty well. They are trying hard not to lose sight of the fact that all forms of apostolate must rest on a spiritual foundation, that no activity that does not rest on God is of any avail. On the other hand, a practical and intelligent approach to the apostolate has not been overlooked. A definite plan was conceived to make the work fit into the pattern of living of present-day housewives and the manner of propagating the work was studied to avoid unnecessary hit-or-miss procedures.

Needless to say it is on a balance of the spiritual and the practical that the future of the Guilds depends. On this score, the organization can only try, as St. Ignatius says, to work as though everything depended on oneself, to pray as though everything depended on God.

CLARA O. CORPUS

The Free Farmers Re-examined

The previous number of this quarterly reviewed a study of the Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) written by Miss Sonya Diane Cater.¹ When a study is as superficial, biased and irresponsible as this one is, it does not in itself merit serious consideration. However, since the real nature, aims and operations of the FFF have not received wide publicity, Miss Cater's dissertation may be grossly misleading to the sociologists, anthropologists, economists and other intellectuals for whom it is written. Moreover, the tone of the dissertation seems to be typical of certain Americans whose attitudes are—to put it mildly—not conducive to maintaining cordial relations between the Filipino and American peoples. For these reasons I believe a rejoinder to Miss Cater is in order.

The most significant error in this dissertation is the observation that the FFF engages in too many activities which it cannot sustain,

¹ *The Philippine Federation of Free Farmers: a case study in mass agrarian organization.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1959.

along with the implication that it could be of greater assistance to the Filipino farmer if it limited itself to one or two types of activity, such as the digging of artesian wells. This observation is significant because it shows a complete misunderstanding of the work of the FFF.

In no country in the world are there more projects to help the farmer than the Philippines. Does the farmer need credit? We have ACCFA and the rural banks. Does the farmer need roads? We have the Department of Public Works and the PACD. Health? We have the Department of Health and the Knights of Columbus. Artesian wells? — Liberty Wells Incorporated and NAWASA. Consumer goods? — NAMARCO. Fertilizer? — The Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources and the Columbian Farmers' Aid. Relief goods?—SWA. Information? — The National Media Production Center. Modern agricultural techniques? — The Bureau of Agricultural Extension, Los Baños College of Agriculture, Araneta University. Irrigation? — ISU. Tenancy problems? — ATC, CAR. Land? — The Bureau of Lands and LTA. Resettlement? — NARRA. Garden seeds? — "Seeds for Democracy".

There is hardly a need of the farmer for which some project has not been conceived and activated. But in spite of grandiose plans, of millions of pesos spent, of voluminous and glowing reports published, one fact stares us in the face: the condition of the Filipino farmer has not substantially improved. Indeed, the indications are that in many important respects it has deteriorated.

Why? More than one reason can be cited. But the chief reason is *in* the farmer himself. All the abovementioned projects originated *outside* him. They are projects of government offices, relief agencies and private associations not recruited from the farmers themselves. They are projects *for* farmers, but not one of them ever really was or is a project *of* farmers. That is why they have fallen far short of their objectives.

Now the basic aim of the FFF is to convince the farmer that all these projects are really his. They are his not only in the sense that they are for his benefit but also, and more important, because they will never succeed unless he makes them somehow his own. And for this he must understand them, desire them and take part in them. The FFF believes that it can bring this about as none of the other agencies and groups mentioned above can. For although they help farmers, they are distinct and separate from them. The FFF, on the other hand, *is* the farmers; the farmers organizing themselves, instructing themselves, helping themselves.

This being the nature of the FFF it follows that it must concern itself not with one or two but with all these projects. They are like the spokes of a wheel converging on the hub which is the farmer; the FFF is a force at the hub, helping to generate the necessary counter-thrust to make the spokes stable and effective. It cannot

therefore as a matter of policy limit itself to one specific or certain specific activities. To do so is to wreck the wheel.

Certainly, the FFF has not succeeded fully in any of the activities in which it has engaged. No one knows this better than we do. But we think that it was right, nevertheless, for the FFF to engage at least in the beginning in all the activities called for by the actual problems of farmers. We think that only by wrestling with these problems no matter how unsuccessfully, only by joining the farmer in his day-to-day struggles against his day-to-day difficulties, can the leadership of the FFF begin to see things as the farmer sees them, and by means of this solidarity help him to make the numerous projects for his assistance, which are conceived outside him, his very own.

Even so, great handicaps, financial handicaps in particular, prevented FFF leaders from attending to every problem that came up, since farmers' problems range from running sores and lost carabaos to land titles and legal suits. In such a context how could the FFF leaders possibly pick and choose? If they had concentrated on one specific project there was no assurance whatever due to lack of resources that they would be able to sustain it. Even if they could their "reach" would necessarily be limited, for by limiting themselves to that one project they would miss innumerable other opportunities of doing something concrete, no matter how small, for the farmers with whom they came in contact.

This was the situation in the early years of the FFF movement. We did not specialize, we tried to tackle each problem as it came up, because we were convinced that that was what the situation demanded. Today, after several years' experience, we feel that we have acquired sufficient grasp of the situation to be able to say which are the most important and immediate problems and to emphasize certain activities accordingly. These are, for the present, leadership training, enforcement of labor laws, political action, land titles, collective bargaining, education for land reform.

Lack of adequate financing remains our biggest single problem. Even Miss Cater admits that the FFF has done something. If it did not do more the reason is purely and simply lack of funds. Take the case of José Feliciano, one of our field workers in Pampanga. After a month with the FFF Joe asked for a leave of absence for two months. Why? "I have run out of money," he said. "I will go and work to earn more money. Then I will come back." When we go out to the barrios we are never sure whether we will take lunch that day. Sometimes we have fried chicken; sometimes only bananas; sometimes one egg for five persons; sometimes nothing at all.

Have we approached ICA? Yes, but nothing doing. ICA can help only on a government-to-government basis. Have we approached

private persons? Yes. They think we are crazy. Have we approached the government? Yes. President Magsaysay gave us one thousand pesos a month; but this lasted for about a year only. Have we approached the bishops? Yes. But only some could give, and only a little. They too have their financial problems. Private foundations? Yes. They gave something at first, but soon stopped giving because the "controversial" character of our work (as they put it) was an embarrassment to them.

And the farmers themselves? The following incident will explain the situation better than any sociological analysis. One of our FFF lawyers, Vic David of Pampanga, took the case of a tenant to court. He did so gratis because the tenant obviously had no money. After several weeks' work on the case it was decided in favor of the tenant. The tenant saw David afterwards. "Attorney," he said, "from the bottom of my heart I thank you. You are indeed a very excellent lawyer." He paused, coughed slightly, and added in a low voice: "Attorney, can you lend me one peso? Neither I nor my friends here who appeared in court for me have any money for transportation back to our homes."

Thus we are caught in a kind of vicious circle. We cannot organize the farmers unless we first win their confidence. We cannot win their confidence unless we show some results. But we cannot show enough results to really count unless we have financial support. And those who are in a position to give us financial support will not do so unless we first show results. We must therefore somehow show results without finances—produce rabbits out of an empty hat. This takes some doing.

Here is another difficulty. In our efforts to win the confidence of tenant farmers we tried to do a lot of things for them. But this led them to think of us as a relief agency. This was the last thing we wanted, for such an attitude towards the FFF would have made the accomplishment of its basic objective as I have outlined it above simply impossible. Yet unless we did something for them they would not listen to us.

Miss Cater knew all this. We told her. But it does not appear in her dissertation. What does appear very prominently in her dissertation is the statement that the leaders of the FFF are ambitious and take great care to retain a monopoly of the top positions. This statement implies that there are actually people who *want* to take the top positions in the FFF away from us. Where are they? We would like to meet them. The fact is that we are so short of help that we even asked Miss Cater during her short stay with us to head our Foreign Affairs Department. She consented, though actually she did nothing whatever. There are of course people who talk a lot; but when we ask them to make a definite commitment to take some at least of the responsibilities of FFF leadership off our hands,

they are suddenly no longer there. Why? The reason is simple. *It is so difficult to work without pay.*

Miss Cater says that the leaders of the FFF are self-appointed. Because they are self-appointed and not democratically elected, she argues, they contradict and nullify the very aim of the FFF, which is to set up a democratic organization for the promotion of democracy among the rural population. I find it amazing that a candidate for the doctoral degree at Cornell should put forward in all seriousness so naive an oversimplification. How could her learned mentors possibly let her get away with that? By the same token, the position of the United States in the Philippines after the Spanish-American War was self-appointed too. To expel the former colonial ruler by force of arms, and to take its place against the wish of the colonial subjects—a wish so pointedly expressed that they too had to be brought to terms by force of arms—this is certainly to assume a self-appointed position of leadership. But does it necessarily invalidate the claim of the United States to train Filipinos in the science and art of self-government? Did it necessarily render ineffectual the efforts of Americans to organize and promote democracy in the Philippines? One hopes that they normally do better than this at Cornell.

But Miss Cater's argument deserves more than an *ad hominem* reply. Let me explain precisely in what sense the leadership of the FFF is self-appointed. It will be recalled that before 1952 the Huks of Central Luzon were so strong that they were able to challenge the government itself. They were strong because they had mass support. They had succeeded in capturing the leadership of the peasant population. But in 1952 they were practically licked. Many of their leaders were either dead or in prison. Thus a leadership vacuum had been created among the peasantry.

Someone had to fill that vacuum. Our farmers could not do it themselves. They were still desperately poor. Most of them had no education whatever. On top of that they were now utterly confused and disillusioned. Realizing this we organized the FFF to fill the leadership vacuum. No one else was doing it except the communists, and if we failed to fill the vacuum the communists would again. So we beat them to it. We appointed ourselves.

Miss Cater apparently objects to this. "Who elected you?" she asks. May we suggest that she put the same question to Abraham Lincoln? Who elected him spokesman for the Negro slaves? Did the slaves themselves?

Miss Cater notes that the top leaders of the FFF are upper-class by birth and background. She concludes from this that they have no real contact and integration with rural folk. For the FFF to be a real mass organization, she says, it must start from below, from the masses themselves. This is fine as a general principle but it has many exceptions. Surely Miss Cater has observed that

many popular movements start from above. The movement for the emancipation of the Negro slaves, for instance, did not begin with the Negroes themselves. It began with Abraham Lincoln, a white man. Gandhi, the leader of the Indian masses, was a highly cultured lawyer educated in England. Nehru comes from a fairly wealthy upper-class family. George Washington was a big landowner. Jefferson's residence, Monticello, was not exactly a log cabin. Yet all will agree that these were great popular leaders who achieved a surprising degree of contact and integration with the people.

Miss Cater is right to this extent, that once the idea of a popular movement is conceived it should by all means be "born in a manger" as Christ our Lord was. That is to say, it should be born among the people, put forth grass roots and grow thus outward and upward. But this was precisely the case with the FFF. The idea of the FFF did come from what Miss Cater calls the "elite". But she might at least have given us credit for realizing the necessity of going to the people and working with them instead of merely on them.

It is true, and we would be the first to admit it, that the leaders of the FFF have not yet achieved sufficient contact and integration with our peasantry. The majority of our farmers do not understand our movement thoroughly as yet, do not realize that it is really *their* movement. Nevertheless we are working at this and making steady progress.

In short, the FFF is not yet a completely popular movement, although all our efforts were and are directed towards making it so.

This being the case it is quite unfair and unrealistic to demand that its leadership should be popularly elected from the very beginning. There is an added reason. At the time the FFF was founded communism had great influence among the people of the barrios. Democratic and Christian leadership at the local level was on the contrary hard to find. The danger of communist infiltration of the FFF was therefore very real and very great. We reckoned then that the majority of our members had at one time or another been under the influence of communist leaders or had had communist leanings. If then we had allowed our movement to be fully democratic from the very beginning, in the sense of leaving the choice of leaders and policies to the rank and file, what would have happened? What has actually happened to other movements which made the same mistake? Our organization would have fallen in no time into communist hands. We would have lost the fight before it started.

To give ourselves a fair chance of survival, this is what we did. As the organizers of the FFF we constituted ourselves its first set of national officers—self-appointed in the sense explained above. Then we went to the people and explained what we intended to do and

how we intended to go about it. They were free to join our membership or not. If they joined, we considered that fact a vote of confidence in our leadership. As our organization grew we appointed provincial and local leaders. They were usually those whom the members themselves suggested to us in the first place. All such appointments were temporary. Wherever we felt that really free elections could be held we held them. Today most of the barrio and town leaders of the FFF are elected by the members. We hope that soon we shall be able to elect the provincial and then the national officers of the organization in the same way. It is essential to move towards this. It would have been fatal to start with it. Miss Cater will perceive, I am sure, that we are merely doing in the FFF what her government did in this country as a whole. We are introducing self-government by stages and from the ground up.

Miss Cater says that the FFF is overstaffed with lawyers. She offers this as a criticism. Since she was writing for Americans, I take it that from the American point of view lawyers should be discouraged from joining an organization like the FFF. If so, Miss Cater should have explained what she knew very well, that a very large proportion of college graduates in this country are law graduates. So much so that many of these lawyers do not really practise law as a profession. They are in a dozen other fields: in business, politics, labor organization, personnel management, relief work, journalism, advertising, even farming. Thus, to say that the FFF is full of lawyers, and to leave it at that, is misleading to no small degree.

Moreover, since most of the members of the FFF are tenants, much of its work consists in disentangling tenancy problems. And tenancy problems are almost always legal problems. I do not know what Miss Cater implies when she says, with a somewhat supercilious air, that the FFF is merely a legal clinic. I can only point out that by far the most frequent request we receive from the farmers themselves is for lawyers to fight their legal battles for them. We try to attend to as many of these requests as we can. But we cannot attend to all of them because *we do not have enough lawyers*. And in any case, if it is a legal clinic that the Filipino farmer needs, then we are going to give him a legal clinic — no matter what Miss Cater or any other budding sociologist may think.

A number of Americans, and not Miss Cater alone, have asked my associates and myself why we organized the FFF. "What's in it for you?" they ask. Since I presume they want to know our basic motivation, our reply has invariably been "love of God and love of neighbor." For many of these Americans that was apparently the wrong thing to say. They shy violently away from the word "love" used in this context. It immediately brands us in their opinion as being either sloppily sentimental or extremely naive. As

one of them said to me: "We don't say we love the people. We just help them." One might ask: if you do not love them, why help them?

But perhaps it is simply a question of idiom? I often hear these same Americans say they love a pet dog or a pet cat; they love ice cream; they love music; they love swimming. Ordinary Filipinos find this somewhat puzzling. These things one *likes*, certainly; but does one love them? Possibly our language is not as flexible as English is.

This brings me to another point. The vast majority of Filipinos are Catholics. And for us the Catholic faith is not just a collection of external rites and ceremonies. It is above all a way of life. It is a set of principles which we Catholics believe in using as a norm of action. Central in this set of principles is love of God and love of neighbor. There is nothing sentimental about this love. There is nothing naive about it either.

But there is apparently a type of American who finds this very difficult to understand. He seems to think that religion should be kept out of any work or movement concerned with the temporal order, as having no relevance in that order. This is where we differ. We think that in any program of social reform religion is of the highest relevance; and I am sure there are a great many Americans, Catholic and non-Catholic, who think so too.

The idea of organizing the FFF came to me as a direct consequence of my Catholic faith. Moreover, I was convinced and still am that unless the other leaders of the movement and the members themselves were similarly motivated and guided the movement would have no real substance or effectiveness in this predominantly Catholic country. If the Philippines were a predominantly Protestant or Jewish country, I would certainly expect that the leaders of a movement for social reform would be deeply imbued with the principles of the Protestant or Jewish faith and would not be ashamed to admit it.

How precisely do we consider Catholicism to be the spiritual foundation of the FFF? Certainly not in the sense that it is organically controlled by ecclesiastical authority. The FFF is directly concerned with secular, not ecclesiastical issues. However, we Catholics believe that human activity even in the secular order has a moral dimension, and our spiritual welfare is vitally affected by it. Hence our movement finds its spiritual link to the Catholic Church not in organic direction but in moral guidance, moral support and spiritual inspiration.

It is quite true that churchmen are interested in the FFF. Some of them have helped us to raise funds. But it is both false and unfair to say that churchmen are meddling in or trying to control the movement. In fact, it took us a long time to obtain official

clearance for the one or two priests connected with the FFF even to act as chaplains and advisers. Miss Cater knows this. We gave her access to our files. She saw the letters we wrote to ecclesiastical authorities and the replies we received. How she could possibly derive from them the conclusion that churchmen are "omnipresent" in the FFF surpasses all understanding. It is altogether regrettable that after we were at some pains to make sure that Miss Cater got a total picture of the FFF from inside and out she should have failed to grasp the simple fact that we *invited* the priests who are at present in our movement, and that in view of their prior commitments they accepted our invitation with reluctance and at no little sacrifice.

Filipino labor leaders, because they are Catholics, occasionally go to Catholic priests for advice. Why do American observers of Miss Cater's type look upon this with suspicion? And why are we treated to their acid comments and sly innuendoes only where *Catholic priests* are concerned? Do they find anything objectionable in Protestant ministers being employed in relief agencies or projects of social and cultural development? Hardly. Are American eyebrows raised in Burma, where Buddhist monks take not only an active but a leading part in coping with social problems? Not noticeably. But because the FFF invites a few Catholic priests to advise them, the question of Church interference in purely secular affairs is immediately raised by a doctoral dissertation published under the auspices of one of America's most illustrious universities. It would be interesting to find out the reason for this difference in attitude.

JEREMIAS U. MONTEMAYOR