



Lights and Shadows: Ethical Perspectives on the Current Political Climate

Anna Marie A. Karaos

John J. Carroll Institute on Church and Social Issues

Presentation delivered at the 115th Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) Plenary Assembly, Pope Pius XII Catholic Center, Manila, 9 July 2017

Good morning, Your Excellencies and Your Eminences.

INTRODUCTION

Our institute was invited to share some ethical perspectives on the current political climate. This presentation has two main parts aside from the introduction and some closing remarks. The first main part explains the use of Catholic social principles as the ethical lens for reflecting on current political developments. The second part is the discussion of these political developments from the perspective of Catholic social principles.

I start with a quote from the German intellectual Max Weber. In a lecture he delivered in 1919 titled "Politics as a Vocation", he posed the question: Can the ethical demands made on politics be indifferent to the fact that politics operates with a highly specific means, namely, power, behind which violence lies concealed?¹ If I might be allowed to paraphrase his statement, I would ask: Can politics realistically be expected to be ethical when the very means by which it operates is power which, in truth, cannot be exercised without violence?

Perhaps at no time in the recent past can the pervasiveness of violence in politics be more true, and in a sense unconcealed, than in the politics that currently subsists in our country under the presidency of Mr. Rodrigo Roa Duterte. Within the past 12 months, we have been given a massive dose of violence in language directed at women and human rights advocates, killings in the streets and in poor neighborhoods, and a destructive war in a region we thought would soon see the dawning of peace. And this is only the first year of this administration.

¹ Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 39.

In this talk, my focus will be more on the ethical dimension of our people's engagement in the politics of the nation, or how the ruled conduct themselves in the nation's political life, rather than on the morality of the politics of our rulers. The basic orientation of this discussion is not so much to pass judgement on the actions of our rulers but more to mirror how Filipinos are confronting the way power is used in public life and the moral dilemmas this presents to those who seek to confront the abuse of power and to witness to the truth meaningfully and effectively accompany our people in their moral dilemmas as they seek to confront the abuse of power in public life, and to witness to what is right in a world so fraught with injustice and deception.

Our institute produces a running assessment of the Duterte Presidency which can be found on our website (www.jjcicsi.org.ph). It is called "Lights and Shadows", an allusion to the need to be discerning and to see the movements of good and evil in our world. It contains a good deal of data organized around 21 topics or areas of concern and the data are assessed according to the eight Catholic social principles contained in the Conciliar Document of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP-II).

My talk this morning is thus a collective effort of the staff of JJCICSI as the "Lights and Shadows" assessment is the main source material for the data and references to Catholic social principles which I cite in my discussion.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL PRINCIPLES AS ETHICAL LENS

Five of the eight Catholic social principles of PCP-II will be prominently cited or referred to in my discussion of the political issues I consider to be posing the most critical challenges to socially committed Filipino Catholics in the present time. These principles are: (1) integral development founded on human dignity and solidarity; (2) social justice and love; (3) peace and active non-violence; (4) love of preference for the poor; and (5) people empowerment.

With these principles as the ethical lens, I share with you some thoughts on how these principles may have been upheld, compromised, or blatantly violated in the way Filipinos have engaged political issues. I chose five issues: the war on drugs, peace with belligerent groups, redistributive reforms, the proliferation of false facts, and constitutional change and democratic institutions.

REFLECTIONS ON POLITICAL ISSUES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL PRINCIPLES

1. The first issue: The war on drugs

PCP II defines integral development as development that "serve[s] the total person in all dimensions including the interior, that is the spiritual dimension and eternal salvation of the human person." It adds: "There is simply no justification for promoting economic sufficiency through ... the immoral repression of human rights." Further it states that "each person has to be respected as an equal member of the human family, actively participating towards the common good in solidarity with others," adding that solidarity must be particularly exercised toward the

poor. Integral development must “serve the good of the whole community and of all its members,” says PCP II.²

Today many people are buying what Sheila Coronel has termed “the drugs-are-the-root-of-all-evil worldview” which reduces the grave and complex problems of criminality and terrorism to drug abuse. This is a highly distorted narrative which, according to Coronel, the President has used to establish political hegemony and to mobilize popular support.³

The administration’s iron-fist campaign against crime and drugs has deliberately disregarded due process, civil and human rights, and violated the Catholic principles of human dignity and the value of life to pursue what the government considers as a more effective strategy based on fear and intimidation. The false narrative on which it is based has created a public enemy in a group of people who are in fact poor and powerless. They are the drug users and pushers whose dead bodies have littered the streets of poor neighborhoods. When the President declared that these people do not have human rights because they have ceased to be human on account of their addiction, many Catholics probably agreed with him. Today, many Filipinos have bought into the ethics of a double standard of human rights, where life is no longer an inalienable right but a right to be earned by being clean of drugs. Some people deserve human rights and others don’t.

The manner in which the war against drugs has been waged has destroyed Filipinos’ sense of solidarity. I have seen many poor people practice solidarity. In the poor neighborhoods of Metro Manila, people helped each other with their daily needs; they entrusted their children to the care of their neighbors. While it is also true that many of them were afraid of the *tambays* whom they suspected of using drugs and could molest their children, the bonds of friendship and solidarity remained strong and the networks of mutual support helped the people improve their communities. When the anti-drug war swept across the cities, the people in these neighborhoods not only became fearful of where the next killing would happen; they also started to distrust and be fearful of each other, not knowing who will tell on whom and whether true or fabricated information would be passed on to the authorities and would result in another dead body. After all they know there is a grassroots intelligence network that keeps a watch list of suspected drug users and pushers.

Violence has become the preferred mode of dispensing justice. Whenever a heinous crime like the massacre in San Jose del Monte occurs, a person (or a group of persons) on drugs is always the presumed perpetrator. When the presumed perpetrators are extrajudicially executed, people quietly give their approval by not protesting the summary execution, even if there is a high probability that those summarily killed may not have committed the crime.

The commission of heinous crimes has been used to justify the reimposition of the death penalty. Opinion polls have shown a high percentage of survey respondents approving of the restoration

² Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II), “The Conciliar Document: Go... I Am With You Always,” in PCP II, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Manila: Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, 1992), #s 293-95, pp. 99-100.

³ Sheila S. Coronel, “A Presidency Bathed in Blood,” *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* (29 June 2017); available from <http://democracyjournal.org/arguments/a-presidency-bathed-in-blood/> (accessed 6 July 2017).

of the death penalty. Our laws and policies are being dictated by fear, disempowering fear that defies both reason and compassion, and contravenes the value of human life and the dignity of the human person.

2. The second issue: Peace with belligerent groups

Peace, says the PCP II Conciliar Document, is not just “the absence of war nor ... a certain balance of power,” but “harmony in the human heart, and in the social order brought about by justice, requiring respect for human dignity and human rights, the promotion of the common good by one and all, and the constant practice of solidarity.” PCP II weds peace and active nonviolence, which it describes as “a quality of the love of Jesus Christ.”⁴

Thus, the pursuit of peace through non-violent means is an ethical principle espoused by the Church. A noteworthy initiative of the present administration is the conduct of peace negotiations with the two longest running insurgencies that have plagued our nation. Peace negotiations aiming to end the hostilities between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Communist Party of the Philippines/New People’s Army/National Democratic Front (CPP-NDF-NPA) have reached the fifth round.

Peace initiatives aimed at correcting historical injustice have been made with two Muslim insurgent groups, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). A new and expanded Bangsamoro Transition Commission (BTC) has drafted a new proposed Bangsamoro Basic Law for submission to Congress this month. A looming shadow, however, is if the BBL is once again not passed by Congress or if the promise of federalism is not delivered.

Another shadow cast on our nation’s peace is the siege in Marawi. The Marawi siege has created a humanitarian crisis with tens of thousands of families suffering from food shortages and illnesses in the evacuation centers and displaced by the ongoing conflict between the Philippine military and the Maute group. Aerial bombings or military airstrikes have destroyed homes, buildings, and properties and failed to prevent the looting of homes despite the martial law declaration that is supposed to preserve public order and protect civilians. The continuing violence and the airstrikes could fuel disaffection toward the government among the Maranao and other Moros who may feel that their lives are not valued by the government. This could breed more violence and extremism in the region.

There has been almost exclusive attention given to a military solution, and little attention and action devoted to trust-building and consensus building among and with the Moro people. The majority of our people could be seeing the problem in Mindanao as just a military problem, with the destruction of the Maute to be won simply by force of military might, forgetting that the path to peace is paved with mutual trust and respect built around true solidarity that must be demonstrated in policies and programs designed to bring development. How well do Filipinos understand the deep aspirations of the Moro people for self-governance, how important this is

⁴ PCP II, #s 307-8, p. 106.

to them, and how many times they have felt betrayed by the Philippine government and how these successive betrayals have fueled and will continue to fuel terrorism in Mindanao?

3. The third issue: redistributive reforms

The Church declares that the goods of the earth were meant by God to benefit all. While the Church recognizes private property is a right attached to human freedom, private property also has a social dimension that is too often neglected in régimes that recognize this right. An almost exclusively privatistic view of private property has contributed to the wide income and wealth gap between the poor and the rich and the increasingly oppressive deprivation of thousands of Filipino families.

There are promising signs that political will might be exercised to bring about redistributive reforms under this administration. Three key departments having to do with the alleviation of poverty and inequality—the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), the National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC) and the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) —are headed by officials with a known pro-poor orientation and a strong redistributive agenda.

The government continues and commits to improve the implementation of social protection programs such as the 4Ps (*Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program*) and to design them for the development of self-reliance among the poor.

Of the ₱151.15 billion budget of the Department of Health (DOH) for 2017, ₱50.2 billion will be provided to PhilHealth to sustain the health insurance coverage of about 15.4 million indigent families and 5.4 million senior citizens.

DAR plans to accelerate the distribution of land to farmers, and to prevent evasion and reversal of agrarian reform. It proposed a moratorium on the conversion of agricultural lands but this proposal was blocked by other Cabinet officials.

The president ordered the return to farmers of the coconut levy funds extracted from them during the Marcos regime. However, the Supreme Court issued a temporary restraining order (TRO) in October 2016 that “enjoins government from touching, releasing or disbursing the Coco Levy fund.”⁵ No measure has yet been approved to support the directive of the president to return the coconut levy funds.

The government’s peace negotiations with the NDFP (which includes the CPP and NPA) has begun tackling the comprehensive agreement on socio-economic reforms (CASER) when the 5th round of talks was suspended last May following the President’s declaration of martial law in Mindanao. A centerpiece agenda in the CASER to address rural poverty and injustice is the free distribution of agricultural lands to tenants which promises to radically expand the depth and scope of the present land reform program of the government.

⁵ Allan Nawal, “SC order stops Duterte from distributing coco levy funds,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 25 October 2016; available from <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/831586/sc-order-stops-duterte-from-distributing-coco-levy-funds-to-farmers-pinol> (accessed 7 July 2017).

How have the people, particularly the elite, viewed redistributive policies? When people say they have become disillusioned with democracy because it has failed to reduce poverty, deliver justice and provide decent public services, how many of them would actually support redistributive reforms?

Why cannot *endo* (the practice of regularly interrupting employment of workers at the end of each contract) be stopped? Why cannot the coco levy be finally distributed to coconut farmers despite court rulings and executive orders directing its distribution? Why cannot irresponsible mining companies be held liable for the destruction they have brought to the environment and the dispossession they have caused to indigenous peoples?

On these issues, the Philippine elite has consistently ignored the Catholic social principles of the universal destination of earthly goods, social justice and the love of preference of the poor. With solidarity severely weakened in our society, the wealthy continue to regard the goods of the earth as an entitlement, as resources to be possessed and exploited for private gain despite the visible massive poverty around them. Both the government and the elite know in their heads that the inequality in wealth and income that has persisted in our country is the root cause of the deepest and longest conflicts, rebellions, and now the growing terrorism in our country. Still the wealthy and privileged cannot free their hearts from the greed and sense of entitlement that prevent them from allowing redistributive policies to prosper.

4. The fourth issue: the proliferation of false facts

Ideally, citizens' participation in governance and the exercise of civic responsibility are enabled by people's access to truthful information. In today's information age, truly information is power. Depending on one's sources of information, one can construct a different reality in one's head from that of the next person who lives with you in the same neighborhood, or works with you in the same office, or rides with you in the bus or MRT. This is another cause of our weakened sense of solidarity – the wide differences in narratives we come to believe.

This is a time made more dangerous by the proliferation of falsehoods and the spread of alternative facts, false news deliberately being circulated for political ends. Ordinary people have become willing or unwitting propagators of false information. Anonymous and unaccountable trolls and bots generate and spread ideas, thoughts and opinions that have no basis in reality yet they are picked up by citizens of the polity. Never before have the people been so bitterly divided in their political views, because never before have facts or what counts as "facts" been so divergent and muddled by half truths. Social media, used by propaganda machines, has become a tool for spreading alternative facts. At the height of the controversy over the burial of President Marcos at the *Libingan ng mga Bayani*, we felt the creeping historical revisionism that has invaded the minds of the young and the not so young. Half of our well-educated young people have probably acquired a distorted view of martial law under the Marcos dictatorship. There are forces that want people to believe false facts so that believing in a certain way, they will act in a certain way; the people have become objects of manipulation; their human dignity violated without them knowing it.

False facts for instance have encouraged the view of drug abuse as a crime rather than a health problem through false claims that drugs irreversibly alter people's brains, thereby making rehabilitation futile and impossible.

Political polarization is fomented by false claims of the existence of a concerted campaign of destabilization. Criticism of the government is equated with destabilization. A polarized political climate is being deliberately created which critics of the government fear could be used to justify the suppression of legitimate political dissent.

When citizens buy into these narratives, they are prevented from exercising their civic responsibility of engaging the state on public policies when information is withheld or distorted. Or they may be led to take positions on social issues that compromise, rather than promote, the common good. Nowadays, people do not know where or how to get reliable data on the number of drug-related deaths. The Chairman of the Dangerous Drugs Board was fired for releasing statistics that contradicted the President's claims regarding the prevalence of drug use. People could be led to regard legitimate dissent or even collecting data on social issues as harmful to public order.

5. The fifth issue: Constitutional change and democracy

PCP II's Conciliar Document reminds us that "no social transformation is genuine and lasting where people themselves do not actively participate in the process." It speaks of "people power" as encompassing "greater involvement in decision-making, greater equality in both political and economic matters, more democracy, more participation."⁶

From the beginning of his administration the president has frequently threatened to suspend the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus and to declare martial law, particularly when he encounters opposition. On May 23, 2017, he finally made good his threat by declaring martial law in the Mindanao after clashes between the military and the Maute group, alleged terrorists who sympathize with the international terrorist group ISIS. Although Martial Law under the 1987 Constitution is far less subject to abuse than it was under former President Ferdinand Marcos, the president, who initially did not appear to grasp the constitutional constraints on Martial Law, said that Martial Law under his own administration would be just as it was during the time of Marcos.

The president effected the postponement of barangay elections originally scheduled in 2016, and has lately expressed the wish to suspend barangay elections until 2020. In justification of this move he claims that 40% of incumbents are allegedly involved in the drug trade and that candidates supported by drug money would be sure to win elections. Critics of the proposal see it as undemocratic and unconstitutional and as a bid to consolidate his power at the most basic level of political organization.

Democratic checks and balances have deteriorated. Within weeks of Duterte's election and more than a month before his inauguration, many senators and the majority of the members of the House of Representatives defected to the administration coalition. Most have since displayed

⁶ PCP II, #s 325-26, pp. 112-13.

an uncritical acquiescence to the administration's legislative priorities and to the president's actions—recently demonstrated by the refusal by leaders of the Senate and House of Representatives to exercise their constitutional mandate to convene a joint session of Congress in order to deliberate the president's declaration of Martial Law in Mindanao. The electorate who voted for these representatives has remained indifferent to the party-switching and railroading of important legislative actions, possibly an indication of their cynicism toward political parties.

The president and his officials, political allies, and supporters show little tolerance for dissent and criticism whether from within the government, in political society, or in civil society. Critics are trolled in social media, subjected to personal attacks that are often untrue, and accused of criminal or treasonous acts. The president's fiercest critic, Senator Leila de Lima, has been incarcerated on accusations of involvement in the drug trade, while the Department of Justice threatens to launch an investigation of "destabilization" activities by other opposition legislators. This creates an atmosphere inimical to the exercise of dissent and freedom of conscience.

The propagation of a mindset that sees dissent as destructive rather than healthy for democracy will impact on what kind of changes people will want to make when the issue of charter change is brought before them. Right now, the shift to a federal system of government is the main change being contemplated necessitating the revision of the constitution. On the one hand, a federal system is consistent with the principle of subsidiarity because of its potential to empower regions/provinces toward greater self-governance and development. It also has the potential to enlarge the space for citizen participation in governance.

On the other hand, the success of federalism also rests on the vitality of democratic institutions at the sub-national level. Federalism imposed on regions and provinces ruled by authoritarian and extractive political dynasties would only bring about more poverty and underdevelopment in these areas.

Beyond the actions of the executive and legislative authorities, on a more fundamental level, the question is how do our people look at democracy? How prepared are they to fight not only to defend it but also to reform its institutions when they show signs of being dysfunctional and corrupt? Will the people prefer to surrender governance to their leader because democracy is ineffective or demands too much of citizens to be effective? Whether we adopt a federal or a unitary system, are the people prepared to be vigilant and be active citizens to make the political institutions work for the common good?

The president has expressed his desire to remove the safeguards in the Constitution intended to prevent authoritarian rule. He has said that the power of Congress and the Supreme Court to review a president's decision to declare martial law limits government's action in the face of war or invasion. When the President says he wants to do away with the restrictions on the declaration of martial law when the constitution is revised, it signals his desire and intention to reconfigure our political institutions to minimize if not totally remove checks and balances, to dilute accountability to the people by those who hold power.

We are already witnessing the harm that can be done when the institutions of government lack independence and fail to exercise checks on other branches of government. We have seen this

in the way the basis for the recent decision of the Supreme Court upholding martial law in Mindanao has been argued. The opinion of legal experts is that the president was given much too wide a latitude in declaring martial law and in determining its scope, and this decision could very well make it easier to declare martial law in the entire country. The absence of institutional independence was also seen in the arm-twisting that occurred in Congress when the bill reimposing the death penalty was passed in the Lower House.

The people's silence in the face of these developments that threaten to reverse gains we have made towards strengthening our democratic institutions is a cause for concern. While these institutions are far from perfect, must our citizens then allow a return to autocracy which history has shown to be more pernicious, corrupt and oppressive? Is the people's silence to be interpreted as a sign of powerlessness? Or is it a sign of approval or consent? Is the President's high approval rating to be interpreted as approval of his autocratic style of governance?

Democracy is very demanding, but it is a human institution most supportive of the dignity of the human person, one that guards and respects individual freedom against the abuses of the state and the powerful, one that challenges the people to see beyond their selfish interest and aspire for the common good, and one that provides the widest opportunity for all citizens to contribute to the welfare of society. But with the people seeing and experiencing too many of its flaws, how can we encourage them to find new hope in a reformed democracy and to be committed to working for its realization?

CLOSING

Because I started with Weber, I will also end with Weber. In the same lecture "Politics as a Vocation", he said there are three forms of legitimate rule: customary or traditional rule (or rule based on habit), personalized charismatic rule, and rule based on rationalized legality. Weber admits that these forms of legitimate rule rarely exist in a pure form. In our case, we have built political institutions based on rationalized legality patterned after the modern nation-state. But I suspect that the difficulties we are experiencing in our politics, and in particular our indecisiveness toward democracy and lack of commitment to it, stem from our pre-modern mindset and political culture which is more attuned to personalized charismatic rule. In the same lecture, Weber asserts that whatever the type of rule, compliance by the people is always based on "hope and fear."⁷ As we look forward to the next 5 years of this administration, may we receive the grace of abundant hope so that hope will overcome our fear.

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⁷Weber, 4.