

the COMMUNICATOR

PUBLISHED BY: THE NATIONAL OFFICE OF MASS MEDIA
THE PHILIPPINE FEDERATION OF CATHOLIC BROADCASTERS

2307 PEDRO GIL, STA. ANA
P.O. BOX 3169, MANILA
PHILIPPINES

TELEPHONE: 58-48-28 • 59-76-41
59-41-76 • 59-76-14

ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MAIL
NOVEMBER 8, 1972, MANILA

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 24, 1976

Volume Four
Number Twenty-Two,

THE GOSPEL AND HUMAN RIGHTS !

by

Bishop Francisco F. Claver, S.J.

- * The Gospel is God's Word spoken to us through His Son for our Salvation.
- * *This Word is the Son of God Himself. To the extent that we accept Him, and allow Him to permeate our whole life and being, will we be certain of attaining salvation.*
- * Our action begins with the Gospel, ends with the Gospel, and our full commitment, as Churchmen at least, must be to the Gospel. It is a commitment that springs from faith.
- * When we take the Gospel as our yardstick for measuring men and events, we cannot, if we are to call ourselves Christians, remain clinically abstracted from what is happening to our people at this very moment.
- * *We cannot be uninvolved in their problems, oblivious to issues confronting them, and to their attempts at solving them.*
- * We cannot.
- * The Gospel of concern and service that Christ preached will not allow it.
- * Hence I can make these judgments in the light of the Gospel, that I say I take as my yardstick:

It is not right for a whole nation to live in fear and uncertainty, for a protracted length of time.

It is not right in this day and age, with our history and experience of democratic processes, for one man, no matter how enlightened or highly intentioned, to decree laws that do not carry in their very enactment the guarantee of permanency.

It is not right to constrain people to accept this peculiar system of laws in referenda which mock their dignity as freely thinking and freely deciding men and women.

It is not right to deprive them of the participation in the making of decisions of state touching their common good.

It is not right to force the Bontoc and the Kalinga and the Manobo to give up prior rights to their lands and homes, without firm assurance that they will be able to continue to live lives that are economically and psychologically secure.

It is not right for the squatters of Tondo and other congested urban areas to be treated like trash, garbage to be swept out of sight of the offended eyes and noses of future tourists, just so we can protect an image of progress.

It is not right for workers to be completely at the mercy of their employers, to see their sweat and labor yielding fruits they cannot share in, are forbidden to share in, equitably.

- * It is not right — it is not right. I could go on and on.
- * There is another way of looking at things, of course. We can also say — "*it is right*".

It is right that men should live as men, unafraid to plan and work together for their future, free to speak their minds on issues that affect their very lives, able to share in the responsibility of making decisions for the common weal, to enjoy the just fruits of their labor.

It is right that the riches of the land should belong to them, not to the powerful few alone, least of all to foreigners.

It is right that they be allowed to associate freely with men of their kind, with men of the same purpose and will; to band together for the protection of their rights before the law, to demand justice when justice is not given by those who hold power over them.

- * It is right — we can go on and on, enumerating what people should have to be people. But let that suffice.
- * However we decide to look at things, whether positively or negatively, our point of view must be suffused by the light of the Gospel.
- * Whatever we decide to do by way of action, it must be empowered with the spirit of the Gospel.
- * I am afraid this is an idea that has never been widely and deeply tested.
- * From our little experience of it, we have an inkling of its immense power.
- * Since we are concerned with action — and with action within an existent, concrete socio-political situation of rampant unfreedom and disregard of rights — let me talk freely of what we in Bukidnon are doing as Church.
- * It is the Church I am most conversant with.
- * I will limit myself to these three general areas:

1. speaking out
2. the creation of public opinion
3. the defense of human rights

1. SPEAKING OUT

- * If the Gospel is indeed Good News, it must be spoken out. And if the Church is the bearer of this Good News, she must speak it out. As St. Paul puts it, *opportune, importune — "in season, out of season"*.
- * Is this too simplistic a way of looking at the Church's primary task of preaching the Word?
- * We in Bukidnon think not. And we have thought so from the very beginning of what is euphemistically called our "national emergency".
- * From the very start of martial law, we as a body have continued to take a critical stance towards acts of government that we judge are undue infringements of people's rights.

* We have used our pulpits freely for this task as occasion dictates. Not by any means to stir the people up to rebellion and violent dissent. But to ask questions that must be asked — and are not being asked for fear — to point to guidelines that must be pointed out — and are not being pointed out because they are deemed "subversive" — to put the responsibility of action where that responsibility belongs — and where despite claims to the contrary it has not belonged — the people.

* *If there is anything that our preaching must do, martial law or no martial law, it must be to foster that deeply human right to be intelligent, thinking, critical men and women.*

* And if there is anything that martial law — rule by the gun — does, it is to prevent through induced and excessive fear precisely this right to think as men.

* Hence, when the Church speaks out under circumstances when speaking out is proscribed as a crime, she not only fulfills her task of announcing the Good News, she also effects in a sacramental manner the Good News.

* She enspirits people; she helps to do away with — or at least lessen — the fear that leads to despair or inaction.

* This form of fear is most dehumanizing and I believe it is a genuinely Christian and human task to destroy it, or, if this is not possible, to help people to face up to it, and meet it, with something of the courage that Christ had in going to His Passion.

* *Christ conquered His fear. So must we. Only then can we look ahead to the final resurrection.*

* And if all this is true, I cannot see how the Church can remain silent.

2. FORMING PUBLIC OPINION

* One of the first rights to be suppressed at the first flush of martial law — and it has remained largely suppressed since then despite claims to the contrary — is the right to information, and consequently to the truth.

* The means of mass communication — radio, press, TV — are controlled.

* The government has relaxed somewhat the tight reins it once held over these media, but purveyors of public news are still benumbed by their fears.

* I might add their fears are not all of their own lively imagination.

* Thus our problem: If we believe an enlightened public opinion to be basic to the humane conduct of society, how do we, under the heavy strictures imposed by the present system of governance, create it?

* How do we counteract the deleterious effects of its almost total absence?

* Even more fundamentally, how do we create the instrumentalities for its formation?

* *The obstacles — the shadow of the gun, the ever present threat of the stockade, and all that it so far has meant, our own fears, imagined and real — these are formidable obstacles.*

* But yet they are not by any means insurmountable. We can always begin by taking the government at its word that there is no more censorship, that the media are free.

* *Free media under a dictatorship — it is a contradiction in terms, and in real life, but it is an idea worth putting to the test.*

* This is where the Church can lead the way.

* We have already discussed her duty and obligation to speak out. But she does not speak out in a vacuum. She speaks to people. And these people are not — should not be — silent, passive spectators as at an oratorical contest.

* *They must respond!*

* Hence the need for creating *fora* — or, to get at the original meaning of the term, *marketplaces*.

* Marketplaces, that is, of ideas, for ideas, with ideas.

* This creating of idea marketplaces, this providing of possibilities for the formation of public opinion other than the fear-ridden ones fomented by the state itself — this, to my mind, is a deeply Christian task.

* It must be part of the action that springs from the Gospel.

* For the right to truth is by no means considered a privilege by our people, one which they are willing to shuck off as just so much extra baggage on the long hard trek to progress.

* The people's appetite for the truth has been whetted by the premium put on it by martial law.

* *But more than truth, I believe they are most hungry for freedom.*

* Freedom is a concern of the Gospel: "*The truth will make you free.*"

3. DEFENSE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

* The fundamental problem, it seems, is that we do not live under a governing system of law, and by law, but of men, and by men.

* This rule of men, true, tries very hard to cloak itself under the semblance of rule of law. I do not think it is succeeding.

* The very laws — decrees, letters of instructions, etc. — that it cranks out almost every day are quite capricious, to say the least. Oftentimes they are contradictory to one another. In some cases, they are known only to the lawmakers themselves.

* This is a highly immoral situation, however constitutional and legal it may be made out to be by students of the law.

* Hence, the first alternative that presents itself to Christian action is to work for the return to a system of government in which law, not whim, is paramount — a system in which the men who make the laws are responsible to the governed who obey the laws — in short, a system in which the dignity of the citizen is in truth honored and respected in his right to participate genuinely in the decision-making processes of the state.

* *Failing this return to more moral and therefore more human modes of governance, the people will have to search their collective imagination and come up with ideas to test in common action.*

* The courts of law are still probably by and large viable — these can be used to right certain wrongs.

* Military tribunals are harder to take, since accuser and judge are practically the same.

* Church-Military Liaison Committees, where they have been formed, can achieve some measure of good only when the Church side is more prophet than diplomat in its witnessing to justice.

* *And the rank and file can always resort to general civil disobedience, as they did in last year's referendum, if all else fails.*

* This disobedience must be non-violent. It must be peaceful.

* *It is paradoxical, but the best defense of human rights is their very assertion and exercise, even while they are being denied or violated.*

* Thus, a man is condemned and punished without due process of law: the very move for due process is itself part of due process.

* People are deprived of the right of free association: their gathering together for common action is itself an assertion of the very right they want to see restored.

* And so all the way down the line with other rights such as those to free speech, to participation in government, to responsible media of communication, to security of life and person.

* These are defended in their actual exercise, their prohibition by edict notwithstanding.

* This paradox, it seems to me, is the logic behind the whole concept of civil disobedience to unjust laws.

* It is also the logic, I might add, from faith: "He who loses his life will find life".

* From our limited experience in forgotten Bukidnon, we see this logic being validated again and again by our poor people.

* Our legal aid bureau has been one of our closest links with the poor of the land.

* *The reason is simple: the poor are poorest not in their economic deprivation, but in their utter helplessness to defend themselves against oppression, to attain justice before a judicial system that has historically been partial to the powerful and to the wealthy.*

* It is a constant source of amazement to us to see them — our poor — fearful and afraid when they first come to us with their grievances, less and less afraid as they find assurance of support, in the end becoming strong defenders of their rights to justice.

* In the very exercise of their right to be human, they become more human. This logic is inherent in Christian action.

CONCLUSION

* In a strongly authoritarian society like we have, Church leadership cannot but play a strong role. The President himself, master strategist that he is, is keenly aware of the strength of this leadership. It seems the only ones not aware of the fact are the Church leaders themselves, the bishops — or at least the great majority of them.

* We look at the Church primarily as people, and we are interested in working out the dynamisms contained in this living concept.

* Over the years, we in Bukidnon — and generally in Mindanao — have, through concrete experience, arrived at some working definition of what the role of the Church is in the area of human rights.

* As we see it, this role has four principal functions:

a.) announcing Gospel principles that must guide thought and action in our striving for the universal good of the people;

b.) denouncing, in the light of those same principles, acts that militate against the people's good;

c.) initiating action for that good, like any responsible sector of society, especially when action is not being taken by those who should;

d.) supporting initiatives of the people for their common good, when these are in fact taken and are in accord with the Gospel.

* These four functions by no means exhaust the role of the Church, but we believe they sufficiently indicate the direction our action must take.

* If the Church is truly the People of God, and we accept this definition pragmatically and not merely intellectually, this Church will have to include all manner of people — leftists and rightists, centrists and whatever else there are who will differ on any given issue.

* But if all these people are to be truly Church, then they must be continually in genuine dialogue with one another; and in dialogue with regard to one common end: the achieving of the greater good of the people, however that good is defined at any given moment.

* *Whatever form that definition will take, human rights, their exercise and protection, will always be integral to it.*

* To more prudent and perhaps more reasonable men, this stance is folly, out-and-out folly. Perhaps it is. But I am afraid that is what the Gospel is all about.

* And that is how we in Bukidnon define it. And as we define it, so is our action. If it is folly, please God, it is part of that much more infinitely unintelligible folly: the folly of the cross.

* *Commitment, concern, service; not in the abstract but in the concrete; not in the past, but in the present; commitment to people, concern for people, service of people — these spell out for us what the Gospel is.*

* This is our hope. This is our conviction. This also is our action.

These are excerpts from a talk delivered by Bishop Claver in "The Alay Kaowa Lectures".

For the full text of all four lectures, edited by Vitaliano R. Gorospe, S.J., write to:

The Communicator
P.O. Box 3169
Manila