Tatanda Ka Rin: Social Security for Lolo and Lola
EDITOR'S NOTE

THE 51ST INTERNATIONAL EUCHARISTIC CONGRESS held last month in Cebu City was indisputably a success. Not only because it was so well organized but more substantially because the theological reflections and pastoral directions in the conferences, catechesis, and homilies treaded along the path of dialogue with culture, with the poor and even with the prevailing socio-political realities the world over. It was a breath of fresh air for one who has been stifled among churchgoers that reduced the Eucharist into a mere religious devotion.

The homilies of the Papal Legate Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, SDB, the Archbishop of Yangon, Myanmar, echoed the Church’s social concern in the light of the social teachings of the Church celebrated and made manifest in the Eucharist—or the lack of it as in many parts of the world under the onslaught of the recent wave of materialism and, on the opposite extreme, religious fundamentalism.

This International Eucharistic Congress had a theme that pursued three tasks, namely: 1) To promote awareness of the central place of the Eucharist in the life and mission of the Catholic Church; 2) To help improve our understanding and celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy; 3) To draw attention to the social dimension of the Eucharist. While most Filipinos are known for being Mass-goers, noticeable especially when they are abroad, the concrete link between faithfully attending Sunday Masses and social responsibility is seldom seen by most Catholics.

In his homily at the opening Mass of the Congress, Cardinal Bo said, “The Eucharist and the poor are inseparable. It was the Church Father John Chrysostom who said, ‘Do you wish to honor the Body of Christ? Do not ignore him when he is naked. He who said ‘this is my Body’ is the same who said: You saw me hungry and you gave me no food’. Mother Teresa advised her sisters: The love for the Eucharist helps us to love the poor…” But ironically, this is not what one finds among church-goers. The social dimension of the Eucharist is hardly visible in the life of most Catholics. Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle calls this sociological phenomenon “practical atheism”. In one of his homilies some years back, he said, “During Sundays we profess our faith in God (in the Eucharist). But starting Monday, cheating happens because of money… we take advantage of other people for our own interests.”

One thing recurrent in the reflections of the 51st International Eucharistic Congress is the challenge to make the Eucharist bear fruit not only theologically or liturgically but most especially, sociologically. This prevailing situation according to Cardinal Bo “calls for our commitment to world of justice. The Eucharist calls for a third world war, a third world war against poverty.” A third world war against the cruelty of having dogs fed with sumptuous organic food while poor children scramble for crumbs from the table, a third world war against a world that produces more weapons whilst more than half a billion do not get enough food every day. Despite this happening, the Eucharist will remain a revolutionary flag hoisted everyday on millions of altars, crying for justice like the prophets of old.

The 51st International Eucharistic Congress, no doubt, was a success. But according to the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines in its recent statement titled “Being Eucharistic in Life and Deeds,” our love for the Mass should manifest in the way we conduct politics, such as in the forthcoming elections. Read on.
"This calls for a commitment to a world of justice. The Eucharist calls for a third world war, a third world war against poverty... a third world war against a world that produces more weapons while more than half billion don't have enough food."

Charles Maung Bo, Cardinal Archbishop of Yangon, Myanmar and Papal Legate at the 51st International Eucharistic Congress held in Cebu City on January 24 to 31, 2016; as he called on the delegates to reach out to the poor.

"They (Chinese Christians) are still in deep waters, in burning fire, a terrible reality."

Joseph Zen Se-Kiun, Bishop Emeritus of Hong Kong; appealed in his talk at the 51st International Eucharistic Congress held in Cebu, for the persecuted Christian especially in mainland China.

"We remind those who win positions by such fraudulent means have in fact no moral right to assume the office they stole."

Socrates Villegas, Archbishop of Lingayen-Dagupan and president of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines; in a statement issued after the 51st International Eucharistic Congress, calling Christians to witness the Eucharist in life and deed.

"That is not charity. It is an insult to the recipient."

Luis Antonio Tagle, Cardinal Archbishop of Manila; in his homil at this year’s Ash Wednesday where he bewailed the hypocrisy of some Christians who abuse “charity for the poor” to enhance their political agenda.

"Be vigilant so that your vision will not be darkened by the gloomy mist of worldliness; do not allow yourselves to be corrupted by trivial materialism or by the seductive illusion of underhanded agreements; do not place your faith in the ‘chariots and horses’ of today’s pharaohs."

Pope Francis, in a stinging rebuked addressed to the Church hierarchy of Mexico during his visit; at the Metropolitan Cathedral of Mexico. The Pope minced no words in admonishing the bishops who have long been criticized for living in luxury and socializing with politicians and wealthy businessmen.
Being Eucharistic in life and deeds

'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (Col. 1:27)
Introduction
We have just celebrated the 51st International Eucharistic Congress in the historic island of Cebu, the cradle of Christianity in the Philippines. We were blessed with the presence of the papal legate, Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, SDB, Archbishop of Yangon, Myanmar and by the presence of huge throngs of lay faithful with cardinals, bishops, priests, and religious. We thank the Lord most profoundly for this fervent manifestation of faith in the Most Holy Eucharist. We are also most grateful to Archbishop Jose S. Palma, Archbishop of Cebu, and the faithful of the Cebu archdiocese as well as to all those who helped make this event an outpouring manifestation of faith.

We celebrate the Eucharist, adore the Eucharist, receive the Eucharist, not only during this International Eucharistic Congress but in the course of our lives year after year. We should now ask ourselves, “Has our celebration, adoration and reception of the Eucharist borne fruit in Eucharistic lives that manifest and extend to others and to the world the life and mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ whom we celebrate, adore and receive in the Eucharist?”
Eucharistic life

For the Eucharist is the Lord Jesus Christ leading us to life, to new life, to transformed life, to fullness of life. He came to give us life in limitless abundance (Jn. 10:10). Beyond material prosperity He came to give us a life of union with him, the Father and the Holy Spirit, and a life of communion with others and the whole creation. He achieved this through his Spirit-filled presence (Luke 4:18-21) among us, through a life of service in obedience to his Father, through works and deeds of mercy and compassion and finally, through the selfless sacrifice of his life on the cross, his resurrection, ascension and gift of the Holy Spirit. His was a Spirit-filled and upright life pleasing to God and wholly dedicated to doing good and healing all who were in the power of the devil (Acts 10:38). This was the life he offered to the Father in the eternal Spirit (Heb 9:14), and was glorified by the Father. This is the life, death, resurrection and ascension we memorialize in every Eucharist, and receive in every Holy Communion. This is the life that reconciled us, sinful human beings, to God and to each other, and healed our world.

Now, Jesus tells us, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life...Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.” (Jn. 6:54,56). When we receive Jesus in the Eucharist, we become what we receive—Jesus the bread of life. If we truly receive Jesus with faith, we should live and manifest his life—a life lived by the grace of the Spirit in obedience to God our Father, and placed at the service of humankind and the world for salvation and reconciliation.

The Church teaches us that the Eucharist is "The source and summit of the whole Christian life" (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church no. 11). Those who celebrate, adore and receive the Eucharist will show and communicate to others the kind of life that Christ lived and offered as a sign of the love and mercy of his Father.

In other words, the unsurpassed gift of the Eucharist lays upon us the responsibility to live according to the Christ whom we receive.

Are we Eucharistic persons?

Hence, we must ask ourselves if our eyes and ears are like those of Christ. Do we read and listen to the word of God in the Bible, as Jesus did? Are our eyes and ears open to the needs of others, especially those who are needy and oppressed, the powerless and the voiceless, the excluded and those who do not count? Are we willing to listen to those who think and act differently from us as Christ would have us do? Do we hear the groan of creation and see its suffering brought about by our wastefulness and greed?

Do we have the mind of Christ Jesus (Cor. 2:16; Phil. 2:5) and see in each person someone made in God’s image and likeness, called by God to be his son or daughter, redeemed by the blood of Christ and bearing in his or her person Jesus himself so that what we do to the least of his brothers and sisters, is done to Christ himself? Do we see in other created things reflections and gifts of the good God who entrusts them all to our charge and care?” said Pope Francis in ‘Laudato Si.’

Do we have the heart of Christ which beats with love for his Father first and above all, and showed that love by obedience even unto death? Do we have compassion for the multitudes, especially of the deprived, the lost, the least, the last and the losers? Do our hearts embrace in love not only our families, friends, relatives and benefactors, but even our enemies and sinners? Does every person have a place in our heart as he or she has in the heart of Christ whose body was broken and whose blood was poured out for the sake of all.

Do our hands reach out to those who are far away, in the social and spiritual peripheries and to those who have wronged us or are very difficult and distant from us? And are our feet the beautiful feet of those who are willing to walk the extra mile to bring the good news of Christ to all so that all may share in the Eucharistic meal prepared by Christ (cf. Rom. 10:15).
In other words, are we willing not only to celebrate, adore and receive Christ but also bring him to others and to bring others to him by our lives, actions and words drawn from him who is the source of our life?

**Eucharistic action in the electoral process**

May this 51st International Eucharistic Congress have an impact not only in our personal lives but also in our life as a nation. An important event in our country this year are the national elections. In the light of our faith in the Eucharist which sees in it the real presence, the life giving meal and true sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, let us examine our conduct regarding these elections.

Most certainly our faith in the Eucharist is incompatible with the use of violence, vote-buying and cheating during the election period. These are selfish, destructive and sinful. Those who engage in such practices should first repent and confess their sin before approaching Holy Communion to receive our Lord. We remind those who win positions by such fraudulent means have in fact no moral right to assume the offices they stole. We also urge the faithful not to allow themselves to be instruments of fraud. Selling one’s vote is a cooperation in their evil” is still voting for evil. Political choice. Voting for the “lesser one fitted for it is also a valid Christian particular position when there is no means has in fact no moral right to assume the offices they stole. We assume the offices they stole. We also urge the faithful not to allow themselves to be instruments of fraud. Selling one’s vote is a cooperation in their evil” is still voting for evil. Political choice. 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Justice and mercy

By Rev. Eutiquio ‘Euly’ B. Belizar, Jr., SThD

A PRIEST and a judge were seated beside each other during a wake. The conversation turned to legal matters. The judge was trying to underscore the superiority of the law over anyone or anything in human society. “You see, Father, as we say in the legal profession, ‘We are a government of laws, not of men,’” he said. “For example, if I were to commit a crime, say murder or slander someone, I must be given my just desserts, a jail sentence if need be, because even if I am a judge, I am not above the law.” The priest thought for a while and said, “How true.

But if you were to come to me for confession and you were truly repentant, I would have to give you absolution because God’s mercy is above the law.”

It is wrong to draw from this story the conclusion that justice and mercy are at loggerheads and one of them ultimately triumphs over the other at some point in life. Still, considering the relation between justice and mercy is no mere theoretical exercise. It is at the heart of a believer’s life.

The more human society matures the greater its sense of justice as a rule to live by. St. Augustine, in fact, in his commentary on John the Evangelist, exclaimed, “Fiat jus et pereat mundus (Let justice be done, though the world perish).” For Pope Francis this is no surprise at all. He even thinks justice is necessary for any aggregation of human beings. “Justice,” he asserts, “is a fundamental concept for civil society, which is meant to be governed by the rule of law. Justice is also understood as that which is rightly due to each individual” (Misericordiae Vultus, no. 20). He, however, also points out that there is a sense of justice that leads to an extreme condition called legalism. He cites the case of justice in the OT being equivalent to “the full observance of the (Mosaic) Law and the behavior of every good Israelite in conformity with God’s commandments”, a legalism can be overcome only by bearing in mind “that in Sacred Scripture justice is conceived as the faithful abandonment of oneself to God’s will” (ibid.). Time and again Jesus shows us in the Gospel
that this so-called ‘faithful abandonment of oneself to God’s will’ can mean more than observing the letter of the Law of Moses. In fact, in regard to the Pharisees and scribes who excelled in literal observance of the Law, he warns his hearers, "I tell you, then, that if you are not righteous in a way better that the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:20). He contrasts the doing of the letter of the Law to what the will of God fully and more perfectly demands. Consider his teaching on the fifth commandment: "You have heard that it was said in the past, 'Do not commit murder; anyone who kills will have to face trial. But I tell you, whoever gets angry with his brother will have to face trial. Whoever insults his brother deserves to be brought to the Sanhedrin, whoever humiliates his brother deserves to be thrown into the fires of hell'" (Mt 5:21-22). Or on adultery: "You have heard that it was said: 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you this: anyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:27-28). On this two alone it is easy to see that for Jesus, justice does not necessarily mean the mere observance of the Law.

No, we are not trying to give justice a bad name. We are rather leading the conversation to what happens to justice when faith in Jesus Christ comes into the equation. In fact, the Holy Father declares that Jesus himself has transformed justice by putting faith above the observance of the Law, saying to objecting Pharisees, "Go and learn the meaning of 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice [Is 6:6]. I have come not to call the righteous but sinners'" (Mt 9:13) [MV 20]. Jesus, says the pope, "is not opposed to justice but rather expresses God’s way of reaching out to the sinner, offering him a new chance to look at himself, convert and believe" (MV 21).

Let’s digress and take a hypothetical case.

If suppose you were a father and you told your children not to play with matches, and they disobeyed you resulting in your house being burned down, would you not save your children because, in your line of reasoning, by justice they deserve the consequences of their disobedience? I doubt it. In life you would let mercy triumph over justice when it concerns persons you love. Should it be any less with God, the Father of us all?
What Philippine officials found in Metro Manila's Child Detention Centers

By Fr. Shay Cullen

“HOUSES of Horror” is how one visitor described the centers where children are held illegally behind bars or in cages.

Senior Philippine officials responsible for the protection of Filipino children at risk made spot inspections of four child detention centers around Metro Manila this week on the orders of Social Welfare Secretary Corazon Soliman following reports in the foreign media. The officials representing various government agencies were shocked and greatly disturbed when they saw the terrible conditions of the jailed children behind bars in these detention centers run by local government units. The national government has limited jurisdiction over them.

In one center, children are held in these conditions from three months to over one year and nine months. The cells for boys are overcrowded. In another detention center, there is only one social worker to handle 43 cases. In three centers, the children were in prison cells behind bars. In one jail, a child looked as young as 6-years old.

All the children in another center were barefooted walking on wet floors. One little girl had swollen feet. The children interviewed told the team that they just do cleaning and food preparation all day. Some of the children were mentally-challenged and in need of special care. A mentally-challenged old lady was in with the children in one center.

The professional fact-finders, accompanied by experienced NGO social workers, did an excellent task. They met officials, social workers, and house parents. They observed, noted, and took photo-documentation of the conditions. The conditions experienced and observed will confirm previous reports by human rights defenders from non-government organizations. It was the first such visit.
on record by government officials of high standing. Four detention centers out of as many as twenty were inspected.

The two teams, making a professional inspection over a period of two days, saw the abusive conditions of dirty, smelly toilets, little children boys, and girls mixed with older youth, wearing dirty clothes, unwashed, and caged behind steel bars and others like criminals in rooms like mesh cages.

They saw children lying and sleeping on concrete floors. Most centers were lacking beds, sleeping mats, and mosquito nets. Food was eaten sitting on the floor. The floors and walls were dirty and one with graffiti. There were no programs for emotional healing, therapy, education, physical exercise, games, books or any mental stimulation. The older boys in one center could touch younger girls.

The fact-finding teams saw that the children suffered 24 hours of confinement with no sunlight exposure. There was bad ventilation and dirty toilets and the smell of urine pervades the place. The investigators asked for the case studies and social workers’ reports, files or records of the children - there were hardly any. Many children were unidentified and without birth certificates and no effort were allegedly taken to find parents or relatives. One child was found to be eight-years old.

The fact-finding team was made up of senior representatives of the following agencies and the Preda Foundation: DSWD-Standards Bureau, DSWD-Protec tive Services Bureau, the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Council National Secretariat and the Regional Juvenile Justice Council and the representative of the Commission on Human Rights.

These higher officials will make their official report to the social welfare secretary who will reveal the truth of their findings to the public. What they did see and can’t be denied is evidence of crimes of child neglect and abuse committed against the children inside these hellholes. It is against Philippine law to put children in jails.

NGOs have found that some children have been sexually abused by the older youth in the detention centers. One girl was sexually assaulted in the Marikina youth center by a male guard. A criminal case is now in court but he still works in the center with ascendancy over the other children. How can it be allowed to happen?

Jovan is one of the hundreds of children thrown inside the barred cells which can only be described as dungeons of death since they die spiritually without love, attention, and care and due to physical and sexual abuse. Young girls who are victims of serious crimes such as sexual abuse, exploitation, and human trafficking are locked up too in centers all over Metro Manila and elsewhere. They are accused as if criminals and not victims and are easy prey for guards and police to be sexually exploited yet again.

The girls held in separate cells receive no therapy or healing. Many are returned to their pimps and abusers since the sex industry is tolerated and sex bars and brothels are permitted to operate with a city permit signed by the mayor.

The Preda organization cares for victims of human trafficking and sexual abuse and urges government agencies to arrest the traffickers and rescue the child victims and refer them to the Preda therapeutic home for girls situated in the countryside.

There they will be protected, healed, and empowered as strong witnesses and help secure convictions. The children rescued from prisons by Preda Foundation are given a place in a happy home where there are no bars or fences and they experience freedom and respect.

We have to do all we can to tackle the root causes like poverty and challenge the officials who neglect the children. It is intolerable that they have to live on the streets and go hungry, neglected, exploited, and then jailed like criminals.

We need to let our feelings enliven our beliefs in the dignity of the human person and turn them into action to free the children and give them a life of dignity.
Reducing Poverty Incidence to Zero

I COULD not believe my eyes when I read poverty statistics published by the World Bank on Asian economies. Malaysia has zero poverty incidence, using the poverty line of $US1.25 per capita per day. Using the same metrics, the Philippines still suffers from a 25 percent poverty incidence, the highest in East Asia. Delving more deeply into the economic strategy followed by Malaysia over the last thirty years or so, we can learn a very important lesson in reshaping our plan for Philippine agriculture in the coming ten or more years, especially as regards new approaches to agrarian reform. The key to this new strategy, that a good number of agribusiness entrepreneurs in Mindanao, Palawan and Negros, among others, are already considering is the replication of the Malaysian institution called the Federal Land Development Authority or FELDA. I was happy to learn in a recent trip to Bukidnon that some agribusiness investors in the Northern Mindanao region are already partnering with FELDA to put up palm oil plantations using the very successful model called “nucleus estate”.

What is FELDA? A quick look at Wikipedia gives a short answer: FELDA is a Malaysian government agency initially founded to handle the resettlement of rural poor into newly developed areas and to organize small holder farms growing cash crops. It was formed on July 1, 1956 when the Land Development Act came into fore. The first FELDA settlement was in Air Lanas in Kelantan. It was launched in 1957 by then Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman. Some 400 settlers were relocated to the area. With an initial capital of M$10 million, the
The next FELDA settlement was opened at Lurah Bilut the following year, comprising about 3,000 hectares of land, with a focus on rubber. In the 1960s and 1970s, government policy began to emphasize crop diversification, in an effort to avoid being affected if the world price of rubber were to drop precipitously. In 1961, FELDA’s first oil palm settlement opened, with 3.75 square kilometers of land. As of 2000, close to 7,000 square kilometers of the land under FELDA’s programs (76%) were devoted to oil palms. It is no wonder that the poverty incidence in Malaysia was drastically reduced during those intervening 40 years.

What is the management scheme adopted by FELDA, something that can be applied to coconut in the Philippines as well as to higher-value crops like cacao, coffee, rubber, and especially palm oil? When the poverty incidence in Malaysia at that time was over 60 percent, settlers were drawn from the rural poor. They were to be aged between 21 and 50 years, married, and physically fit. Priority was given to those who did not own any land to farm. New settlers were assigned to a particular settlement, and were given 4 to 6 hectares of land to cultivate, usually either rubber or oil palm. All the settlers were required to reside at the settlement itself and were allotted 1,000 square meters in a planned village, where their home—already built by FELDA—was located. Although basic infrastructures, such as piped water and electricity, used to be lacking, nowadays such facilities are readily provided. Schools, medical centers, and places of worship are also made available. These are all an integral part of the “township” scheme which is included in the “nucleus estate” approach, involving a large “nucleus” farm put up by the State or a private firm like Sime Darby or Guthrie working with the small farmers surrounding the nucleus as contract growers (the plasma).

Originally, FELDA schemes were designed as co-operatives, where instead of each settler owning a defined piece of land, each one held an equal share in the ownership of the particular scheme. What could have been predicted from normal human behavior, the settlers did not prefer this scheme, as workers who did not tend to the land assiduously still benefited from the revenues earned by all (the so-called free rider syndrome). The Government then set up a three-phase program where in the first phase, the co-operative remained as a mechanism for the settlers to learn how to farm. In the second phase, each settler was given a specific plot of land to work. Finally, in the third phase, he was given the land title to that plot. There was a proviso, however, that the settler could not sell the land without the permission from FELDA or the federal government. The costs of acquiring, developing, and allocating the land are funded by loans made to FELDA settlers, payable in monthly installments by deductions from the settlers’ income over a 15-year period. Because of the growth of commercial activities in the various townships, the families of the settlers are able to engage in other economic pursuits, such as shop keeping, small-scale manufacturing, services to households, etc. Other members of the farm household are able to obtain employment outside the settlement. FELDA and its private sector equivalents have been instrumental in reducing poverty in the countryside of Malaysia.

FELDA was so successful that it was able to diversify from its original business of land development to other economic ventures. First, it launched a number of private corporate entities, the largest of which is FELDA Global Ventures Holdings, considered to be the world’s largest plantation operator, with 811,140 hectares of oil palms, not only in Peninsular Malaysia but also in other countries like Indonesia. FELDA has subsidiaries involved in businesses such as marketing, transportation, milling, and financial services (it has a significant investment in Maybank, which is very active in the Philippines). A few years back, when it did an IPO, it attracted the largest pool of investments in the history of capital markets, a record broken only a few years later by Alibaba. What has happened to FELDA in Malaysia reminds me of Mondragon, the largest cooperative in Spain and Raifiassien, the farmers cooperative in Bavaria, the Federal Republic of Germany. Both have grown into conglomerates operating banks, industrial enterprises, and other large businesses. There is reason to hope that if we can replicate FELDA successfully in the Philippines, one day our farmers can become rich by also having investments in other sectors of the economy.

I am glad that even the Philippine Coconut Authority is open-minded enough to transform some of our coconut farms into palm oil plantations. There are other coconut growing regions, such as those in Palawan, that are diversifying into cacao plantations (coconut, being a very good cover crop for cacao). Another 15,000 hectares of coconut farms with close to 6,000 small farmers in the town of Nakar in Quezon province are being programmed by a group of investors and professional managers for diversification into other higher-value crops, in addition to the replanting of higher-yielding coconut varieties. This group plans to adopt the FELDA scheme. All these very doable investments will be facilitated by a more flexible approach to agrarian reform that will avoid the mistakes of the first phase of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP), which in the words of a leading Filipino economist only increased the number of poor farmers in the Philippines, in great contrast with what happened in Malaysia. (For comments, my email address is bernardo.villegas@uap.asia.)
Bishops laud lay movement for ‘God-centered’ leaders

MANILA, Feb. 8, 2016—The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines lauded an initiative by a group of lay faithful from various Christian churches who joined hands “to do God’s work” in the political field.

Archbishop Socrates Villegas, CBCP president, said the Pilipino Movement for Transformational Leadership (PMTL) is a “significant gift of the Spirit” to the Catholic laity.

“May this work of God for the conversion, transformation and renewal of politics in the Philippines be blessed a hundredfold,” Villegas said in a statement.

One goal of the PMTL, composed of Catholic and Evangelical communities, is to campaign for “incorruptible” local and national leaders for the May 2016 elections.

Through a “people’s primary,” the movement will endorse candidates for President, Vice President and senatorial positions, based on its agreed criteria and reform agenda known as “Gabay Kristo (Christ Guide).”

But since Catholic leaders don’t endorse candidates, Villegas encouraged other bishops to instead organize on the diocesan level, lay leaders who can help bring the vision for a “Christ-oriented political engagement.”

As decided during the recent CBCP plenary assembly in Cebu City, the bishops also agreed to encourage the diocesan councils of the laity to support the PMTL.

The bishops have been calling for more active lay participation in principled partisan politics.

They said that the laity has the duty to campaign for candidates they believe to be honest and competent in order to reform the country.

(May Lagarde/CBCPNews)

PPCRV tells candidates: Keep campaign ‘dignified’

MANILA, Feb. 8, 2016—A Church-based poll watchdog group called on candidates to take the campaign period with dignity and respect.

Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) national chairperson Henrietta de Villa said she is hoping that politicians will have more maturity in dealing with each other.

“Magsakatao ka! Makipagkapwa tao ka! Magkampanya ka ng wasto!” said de Villa.

“Give due dignity to your person by conducting daily examination of conscience to realize that you were made in the image and likeness of God,” she said.

The PPCRV head particularly urged candidates to give due dignity to life by conducting “violence-free campaign” and with due regard to the environment.

“No lives taken, no lives damaged,” said de Villa. “Give due dignity to nature by conducting your campaign that does not deface/nail trees/plants with your posters/placards and does not pollute the environment.”

Also, she asked candidates to give voters the dignity they deserve by engaging in clean, honorable, accountable, meaningful, and peaceful campaigns.

The campaign period for national candidates, or those running for president, vice president, senators and party-list groups, will run from February 9 to May 7.

On the other hand, candidates for local positions will begin on March 25 and will run up to May 7.

(Roy Lagarde/CBCPNews)
’Presidentiables’ dared: Out environmental platforms

QUEZON CITY, Feb. 8, 2016 – Months before 2016 elections, various church and pro-environment groups joined forces Friday in a bid to challenge presidential “hopefuls” to put socio-environmental issues at the center of their electoral platforms.

“Elections are not just about personalities and politicians but is an opportunity to enjoin people to act collectively on important issues like the environment and the climate,” said Gina Lopez of Bantay Kalikasan in a statement.

Called themselves the “Green Thumb,” the coalition was brought together by a common mission to raise awareness on naturally interrelated environmental issues connected to social matters, especially poverty and corruption.

Green agenda

According to organizers, the group aims to get the commitment of national and local candidates to embrace a “green agenda,” and hold newly-elected public officials accountable on their positions to their environmental mandates.

“We aim to raise the discourse on the environment among the national consciousness during and after the election period,” Lopez added.

The Green Thumb Coalition also plans to engage with political aspirants and the voting public by raising the debate on eight key environmental issues at the national level, including: biodiversity and ecosystem integrity; natural resource and land use management and governance; human rights and integrity of creation; climate justice; mining, extractives, and mineral resource management; energy transformation and democracy; sustainable food sovereignty; and people-centered sustainable development; and waste.

Environmental responsibility

According to lawyer Aaron Pedrosa, who serves as Philippine Movement for Climate Justice (PMCJ) Energy Working Group head and SANLAKAS secretary-general, the Green Thumb Coalition is set to hold “green sorties” in 15 provinces nationwide to foster discourse on environmental and climate agenda, and to challenge candidates to support the campaign.

“When communities, homes and lives are on the line in the context of climate change, leaders ought to take heed,” he explained.

Among others, the coalition is composed of: Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines-National Secretariat for Social Justice (CBCP-NASSA); Global Catholic Climate Movement (GCCM); Ecological Justice Interfaith Movement (ECOJIM); Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines (AMRSP-JPIC); Philippine Movement for Climate Justice (PMCJ); SANLAKAS, Save Sierra Madre; ABS-CBN Lingkod Kapamilya Foundation, Inc. (ALKFI); and Climate Reality. (Raymond A. Sebastián / CBCP News)

Church calls for aggressive approach vs Zika virus

MANILA, Feb. 6, 2016—The Church’s health ministry has joined efforts in raising public awareness about the Zika virus and ways to prevent its spread in the country.

Camillian Fr. Dan Cancino, executive secretary of the CBCP Commission on Healthcare, said they have started the work with people living in mosquito-prone areas.

“We started it (awareness drive) in areas vulnerable to Zika virus. These are actually the same population that are vulnerable to dengue,” Cancino told Radio Veritas.

Local health officials are bracing for a likely outbreak of the virus as the mosquito-borne disease spreads to more countries.

The Health department on Wednesday said the country was still free from the virus and assured it can handle cases of Zika virus.

Cancino urged the government to adopt a more aggressive approach to thwarting an outbreak that is widespread in the Americas.

“Our appeal to the Department of Health is to [widen] awareness on the Zika virus. Although this is something new, there are still many people who are not aware of it,” he said.

While there is no specific treatment or vaccine to prevent Zika virus, health officials said prevention is still the key which should start from everyone’s backyard.

The priest said it all boils down to controlling mosquito populations and eliminating places where they lay eggs like water containers in and around the house. (R. Lagarde/CBCP News)
Tatanda Ka Rin: Social Security for Lolo and Lola

Hard to imagine that Pres. Aquino and Social Security Service (SSS) officials would have opposed the Php2,000 pension hike if they were low-income senior citizens on the receiving end of meager SSS pensions
By Sonny Africa

MANILA Archbishop Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, at the recently concluded International Eucharistic Congress (IEC) in Cebu City, lamented the emerging "throwaway" culture and individualism which skews people's values. It's no coincidence that these themes resonate in the current controversy around the Php 2,000 pension hike vetoed by Pres. Benigno Aquino, III. They have a common root: capitalist-driven economics that deifies the market economy, exalts individual self-interest, and promotes materialistic values instead of the ethical norms of a humane society.

Social insecurity

The philosopher John Rawls famously proposed his "veil of ignorance" as a way to test the justness or fairness of something. When designing rules for society, he argued, you should be ignorant of what social position you yourself will occupy—a variation of the maxim "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

So it's hard to imagine that Pres. Aquino and Social Security Service (SSS) officials would have opposed the Php 2,000 pension hike if they were low-income senior citizens on the receiving end of meager SSS pensions. Unfortunately, most Filipino lolos and lolas do not have savings, incomes from investments, or children with high-paying jobs to keep them secure as they grow old. Pensions, for millions of elderly in the country, are not just pocket money but a literal lifeline.

The "heartless" presidential veto of the Php 2,000 pension hike bill draws attention to necessary reforms within the SSS. The central issue is how the SSS can pay for more decent pensions. Pres. Aquino and SSS officials argued that the additional Php 56 billion cost of the proposed hike is unaffordable.

However, the principal author of the bill, Rep. Neri Colmenares of Bayan Muna and the Makabayan bloc, has tirelessly pointed out reasonable measures to pay for this. The SSS has Php 447 billion in assets as of October 2015 which can be tapped until around 2029. There is also Php 198 million in foregone revenues from idle assets, as much as Php 13.5 billion in collections from delinquent employers, and any balance from up to Php 325 billion in uncollected revenue as of 2008.

SSS officials agree with the figures and, at least in principle, the need for higher pensions. But the actuarial life until 2043 of the reserve fund is given more importance than the welfare of low-income pensioners and the hike is narrowly seen as possible only with a significant increase in member contributions. The terms of the debate are straightforward if somewhat perverse: fund managers invoke "fiduciary responsibility" to the SSS members while SSS members themselves, with a better grasp of the social responsibility of the government for their welfare, demand the pension hike.

The Php 2,000 hike will immediately improve the welfare of up to 2.2 million Filipino pensioners. But many millions more will gain if the controversy surrounding the hike prompts radical reforms in the country's pension system of which the SSS is just a small and, actually, intrinsically flawed part.

Thrown away

What is the state of our senior citizens? There are 7.8 million Filipinos over 60-years old. The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) officially reports that only 16.2% of senior citizens are poor, but this uses a poverty threshold of just Php 52 per day (or some Php 1,582 monthly). This grossly underestimates real-world expenses for decent living and is also insensitive to the food and medical needs of senior citizens. Using a more realistic Php 125 per day (or Php 3,800 monthly), IBON estimates that at least two-thirds or over 5.1 million of our lolos and lolas are poor.

Filipino senior citizens can get income support from either of two pension schemes—SSS for private sector employees or Government Service Insurance System (GSIS) for government employees—or the monthly stipend under the Expanded Senior Citizens Act of 2010. Overall pension coverage is narrow and shallow despite these three options.

Only 3.4 million or 42.9% of our elderly receive pensions from the SSS, GSIS, and under the Senior Citizens’ Law. The 2.2 million (27% of elderly) SSS pensioners today receive at least the minimum Php 1,200 per month with the average reportedly at some Php 3,200 per month. There are around 272,000 (3.5%) GSIS pensioners receiving at least the minimum of Php 5,000 per month. Lastly, some 940,000 (12%) senior citizens receive a fixed amount of Php 500 monthly.

This means that almost six out of ten (57%) elderly Filipinos, or some 4.5 million, are outright not covered at all and don't receive any pen-
This also means that almost 97% of elderly Filipinos, or around 7.5 million, are either not covered or receive pensions below a reasonable poverty threshold. Only the 3.5% of elderly receiving GSIS pensions are brought above the poverty threshold.

Coverage is poor because the country’s main pension schemes are designed as an individualistic mechanism more than real social security. The SSS and GSIS are contributory schemes that only cover their members, whose memberships depend on member contributions, and whose level of benefit depends on the level of member contributions.

This appeals to neoliberally-minded folks whose guiding principle for society is that individuals are only to be rewarded based on personal effort and who believe structural inequities are natural, just, necessary, or all of these. But the problems of basing pensions on regular work-based contributions in the Philippine context of so much joblessness and pervasive, irregular, and low-paying employment are clear.

IBON’s estimates some 4.2 - 4.3 unemployed Filipinos. This is already some 10% of the labour force who are likely to have difficulty making consistent payments, if any. Having employment is not even an assurance of becoming an active and qualified SSS member. IBON estimates that 22.4 million Filipinos, or almost six out of ten (58%) of total employed, are non-regular workers, agency-hired workers, or in the informal sector with at best erratic ability to pay contributions. This is consistent with how SSS officials themselves explain that they are unable to collect from over six out of ten (62%) of their members—hence collecting payments from only 12 million, or 38%, of their some 32 million members.

Most families cannot really afford to spare cash for the premiums because of their very low incomes. Around 11.2 million Filipino families try to make do with just Php 10,413 or much less a month and another 5.8 million with only up to around Php 18,128. These family incomes are below the Php 19,000 realistically needed to keep an average family with five members just barely out of poverty.

These mean that strictly linking benefit levels to member contributions is self-defeating. Low incomes in the present will be reduced further, while pensions in the future will still be inadequate. And yet these are the very workers, farmers, fisherfolk, informal sector workers, and their families on the knife edge of subsistence and without wealth whose elderly face insecurity in their old age.

State responsibility

So what is to be done? The Php 2,000 SSS pension hike is a start and the SSS unambiguously has the resources for this. The SSS Act of 1997 (Republic Act No. 8282) also authorizes the national government (NG) to appropriate the necessary funds for SSS expenses. But this should merely be the start of a far-reaching overhaul of the country’s pension system.

The government has to confront Philippine underdevelopment realities head-on and aim for a non-contributory, tax-financed, universal social security system. The "social" in "social security" means that society, through the government, should be assuming primary responsibility for the security of its most vulnerable citizens, including the elderly. Contributory member-financed schemes such as SSS and GSIS should just be complementary measures to a central scheme designed to reach the majority of Filipinos.

The government already has something to work with: the Expanded Senior Citizens Act.
of 2010 or Republic Act No. 9994. Among the various benefits and privileges the law gives to senior citizens is a monthly stipend of Php 500 funded by the national government from its annual budget. The law can be amended to increase this amount – for instance to a minimum of Php 5,000 or more – and to expand the coverage to all Filipino senior citizens with only the barest minimum of requirements needed to establish eligibility. As much of the country’s 7.8 million elderly should be reached beginning with the poorest and most vulnerable among them.

The limited stipend to a few elderly today shows how far the scheme still has to go. The monthly Php 500 (about US$12) stipend reportedly reaches 12% of Filipinos over 60-years old. The equivalent scheme in Thailand covers 69% of Thai over 60-years old and gives them 600 baht or the equivalent of US$20 monthly. Indonesia’s and Malaysia’s schemes have much less coverage but respectively give US$32 and US$94 monthly. Brunei’s scheme with 82% coverage gives US$199 monthly.

As it is, the Philippine government only spends 0.04% of gross domestic product (GDP) on pensions for the elderly versus the 0.33% of GDP by the Thai government.

The government is so enthusiastic about public-private partnerships (PPP) that it is not unlikely for proposals to be made to privatize the country’s social security system. This is an undesirable path. Pension schemes were privatized across Latin America, Central Europe, and Eastern Europe over the globalization decades 1980s-2000s supposedly to ease the fiscal burden on governments and to improve efficiency. These privatizations failed though and there have already been partial or complete reversals in Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, Bolivia, Poland, Hungary, Russia, and other countries.

**Taxing the rich**

Income security for all lolas and lolas is possible if the country’s political leadership so chooses. Creating a universal pension system is a complex thing and has to consider demographics, risk, eligibility, machinery, and administration. But the biggest issue is where the financing for such a far-reaching overhaul of social protection for the elderly will come from. Again, Philippine realities point policy in a clear direction.

The Aquino administration already has considerable leeway with the improved fiscal situation under it that is has played up so much. The NG budget deficit is down from Php 314.5 billion in 2010 to just Php 46.5 billion in the first 11 months of 2015, corresponding to its declining share in GDP from 3.5% to just 0.3% over the same period.

The Php 268 billion reduction in the deficit between 2010 and 2015 represents the leeway for the government to subsidize the SSS pension hike. The additional Php 56 billion outlay needed for the Php 2,000 pension hike is well within this range as well the supposed Php 16-26 billion deficit that the SSS will supposedly incur as its revenues fall short of expenses. The SSS had earlier reported to Congress just a Php 4 billion deficit.

This leeway is temporary though and more sustainable sources of financing are needed. For this to happen some deeply entrenched practices have to be corrected. The last decades of neoliberal globalization promoted capitalist values of individualism, self-interest, praise of wealth accumulation, admiration of affluence, and esteem of high incomes. Private property was disconnected from any sense of social function or social responsibility beyond voluntary charity.

Markets more efficiently concentrated wealth in the hands of a few at the expense of the many and a supportive liberal tax system was built. This has to be changed and the tax system made more
progressive to raise resources for genuine social security.

As much as P409 billion in additional revenue can be raised from more aggressive collection of corporate income taxes, especially from large corporations. IBON estimates up to P780 billion in potential tax revenues from firms in 2012 yet only P371 billion was actually collected by the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR). Restoring the corporate income tax to its 35% rate before 2009 would also immediately raise at least P20-30 billion.

Increasing taxes on just the richest 1.5% of Filipino families will not only raise some P91 billion but also reduce the extreme inequality in the country. The richest 156,000 or 0.7% of families had a cumulative income of P356.9 billion in 2012 with an average annual income of P2,287,836. Taxing just an additional 20% of this income will raise P71 billion. The next richest 170,000 or 0.8% of families had a cumulative income of P198.4 billion with an average annual income of P1,271,484. Taxing just an additional 10% of this income will raise P20 billion.

The country’s 100 - 150 super rich families have incomes of at least P50-500 million annually. Doubling income taxes on them could raise some P1-2 billion. More effective collection of estate taxes over time will also raise hundreds of billions in revenues. The BIR’s average annual collection of estate taxes of less than P600 million in the decade 2000-2009 compares poorly with, for instance, the P3.2 trillion in wealth accumulated today by just the 40 richest Filipinos.

Valuing our elderly

Old age pensions are vital for ensuring the income security and well-being of Filipino senior citizens. Only some two-fifths of our elderly receive pensions and only a small minority receive pensions big enough to lift them out of poverty. Ironically, those most in need of pensions are among those who get the least or none at all, while those who have the least need receive the largest pensions. The gap has to be filled in by non-contributory tax-financed pensions by a government unafraid to confront the country’s wealthiest families and biggest corporations.

The elections are nearing and how candidates propose to meet the challenge of ensuring the rights, dignity, and income security of all Filipino senior citizens will give insight as to their underlying values. The stand they take will reveal much about their beliefs about the gross inequality in the country, wealth redistribution, and the crafting of an economic system more in line with the morality and ethics of human values.
Bishop hits Aquino for veto of SSS pension hike

PRESIDENT Benigno Aquino III drew the ire of a Catholic bishop after he vetoed a bill increasing the pension of Social Security System (SSS) members.

Manila Auxiliary Bishop Broderick Pabillo said Aquino’s action only shows his lack of empathy for ordinary Filipinos.

“By vetoing the bill for increase of pension of SSS members, PNoy has clearly shown that his program of ‘inclusive growth’ is mere rhetoric,” Pabillo said. “Do we vote those who will continue this anti-poor policy?”

Malacañang said the stability of the SSS would be compromised if it would allow the additional fee of P2,000 for each of almost two million pensioners.

According to prelate, this is not the first time that the President has rejected a measure that aims to uplift the condition of the poor.

“We must remember that PNoy also vetoed the bill on Magna Carta for the Poor,” he said.

The prelate said millions of poor Filipinos needed the measure because it would provide them shelter, livelihood, and health services.

Aquino, however, rejected the bill in 2013, saying that the government does not have the money to implement it. (R. Lagarde / CBCPNews)
Our brothers and sisters in Christ:

One of the astonishing revelations of the Gospel is that every human person is created for both human and divine love, because every human person is made for a Triune God who is infinite mercy and love: “God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life.”[1] This is our great vocation, to enjoy the friendship of God and of our neighbor, whether he is a friend or a stranger, in God.

In this life, we realize this call by growing in charity, the theological virtue that empowers and transforms us into the likeness of Christ himself so that we can love God, our neighbors, and ourselves, as God himself loves us.[2] In the life to come, we will be perfected in this vocation when God so elevates us that we will be able to see him face to face.[3] On that day when we directly experience God, “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 Jn. 3:2).

As Jesus Christ revealed through his life and especially through his death on the Cross, true and divine love is the sacrificial yet fruitful gift of self: “The clearest proof of the reliability of Christ’s love is to be found in his dying for our sake. If laying down one’s life for one’s friends is the greatest proof of love (cf. Jn 15:13), Jesus offered his own life for all, even for his enemies, to transform their hearts.”[4]

Each of us is called by Christ to live and to experience and express this kind of self-less love: “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” (Matt. 16:24). Each of us is called to give himself away in service of God and of neighbor. This is the only road to authentic fullness and happiness: “Man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.”[5]

As Pope St. John Paul II taught in his theology of the body, this God-given vocation to self-gift in communion is inscribed in our bodies as masculine and feminine: “The body, which through its own masculinity or femininity right from the beginning helps both to find themselves in communion of persons, becomes, in a particular way, the constituent element of their union, when they become husband and wife.”[6] Our bodies reveal that we come from another and were made for another. They reveal that our sexuality is a beautiful gift from God that is ordered towards the perfection of our vocation to love.

Created for Chastity

Because we are created for love, we are also created for chastity. Chastity involves “the successful integration of sexuality within the
A chaste person masters his desires for sexual pleasure so that he can experience and live relationships that are true, good, and beautiful. Chastity helps him to recognize and to acknowledge the profound truth that our sexuality is ordered primarily to the love of husband and wife in marriage. It also affirms that every human person is made in the image and likeness of God and as such can never be used merely for our own sexual gratification.

“The chaste person maintains the integrity of the powers of life and love placed in him. This integrity ensures the unity of the person; it is opposed to any behavior that would impair it. It tolerates neither a double life nor duplicity in speech.”

Chastity takes time to attain, and often, only after a struggle, but it is an integral and necessary ingredient of authentic love. As Pope Francis has emphatically taught: “All of us in life have gone through moments in which this virtue has been very difficult, but it is in fact the way of genuine love, of a love that is able to give life, which does not seek to use the other for one’s own pleasure. It is a love that considers the life of the other person sacred.”

Chastity demands self-mastery not in order to repress but to bring to perfection our ability to love truly as Christ himself loves us.

The Corruption and Evil of Pornography

Pornography “consists in removing real or simulated sexual acts from the intimacy of the partners, in order to display them deliberately to third parties.” It includes visual images, written texts, and audio conversations, created to arouse the erotic desires of others.

Pornography is a grave evil that offends against chastity because it perverts and undermines the marriage act, the sexual intimate self-giving of husband and wife to each other, which should be enjoyed as a personal and private gift from God. It does grave injury to the dignity of all involved, performers, consumer, producers, and distributors, since each is dehumanized by an industry that exists solely to objectify persons for illicit profit.

First, pornography harms the performers in the sex industry, even when they have given their consent to their immoral activities. It reduces them from persons made in the image and likeness of God who have been created for love, into mere sexual objects who are bought, sold, and used by others for sexual gratification.

And in the process, it stunts their emotional development and wounds their hearts, making it difficult for them to enter into the life-giving relationships of mutual trust and respect for which they were made. Not insignificantly, sex performers also face physical harm, sex abuse, and sexually transmitted infections.

Next, pornography harms the consumer by sabotaging his or her ability to develop intimate and authentic relationships. It encourages men and women to objectify others so that they no longer see them as individually unique and valuable. It promotes and advances a distorted view of human sexuality, which is often linked to violence, abuse, and the victimization of others, especially of women. It makes consumers, slaves to lust, which is the “disordered desire for or inordinate enjoyment of sexual pleasure.”

Pornography is especially harmful for children and young people who are beginning to discover their vocation to love and to be loved, because it makes it difficult for them to enter fully into the self-giving relationship of mutual trust, sacrifice, and respect that is necessary for marriage. Empirical studies have shown that prolonged exposure to pornography in young people not only makes them cynical about love, marriage, and child raising, but is also correlated with high-risk sexual behaviors that put them at peril for sexually transmitted diseases.

In his Lenten Message for 2014, Pope Francis included pornography among the many vices that can damage the family: “How much pain is caused in families because one of their members — often a young person — is in thrall to alcohol, drugs, gambling or pornography.” Even the occasional use of pornography can lead to addiction, both of which can injure marriages and destroy families because they undermine the trust and exclusive intimacy that binds a husband and a wife together.

Finally, pornography corrupts its producers and distributors. It turns them into callous exploiters who take advantage of the emotional, psychological, and economic vulnerabilities of sex performers and consumers for profit and gain. It is particularly heinous when it makes them complicit in the crimes of child abuse and human trafficking. In the end, pornography blinds everyone to the true beauty and meaning of human sexuality.

For all these reasons, pornography is a grave evil that attacks and undermines not only the individual person but also the common good. As such, producing, distributing, and using pornography are serious sins against chastity and human dignity that need to be confessed to obtain God’s pardon and mercy. They are immoral and harmful not only in themselves, but also because they often lead individuals to commit other grave sins and even serious crimes that disturb the peace and unity of every society.

The global scourge of pornography in the Philippines

It is a contemporary tragedy that pornography has become a pervasive social cancer, one that corrupts countless men, women, and children worldwide. It is a global scourge that has been fed by the rise of the Internet. Online, pornography is instantly accessible, apparently anonymous, and mostly free.

Data from a 2015 Study of World Internet Users and Population Statistics showed that there almost 3.3 billion
internet users around the world (46% of the human population).[16] In the Philippines, 47 million citizens (43% of the population) regularly use the web. Significantly, Filipino children are among the children in Asia with high access to the Internet: 82% of Filipino children use the Internet at least once a week, while 37% are online every day.[17]

Given the all-pervasiveness of the Internet, it should not be surprising that pornography has invaded our homes, workplaces, schools, and churches. The Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality (YAFS) Study of Filipino Youth in 2013 has revealed that 56.5% of Filipinos aged 15 to 24 years old have been exposed to pornographic videos and movies, 35.6% have been exposed to sexually explicit reading materials, and 15.5% have viewed pornographic websites.[18] These young people are the future husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, of our nation, whose capacity for self-giving love has been deeply wounded. Therefore, parents must be held responsible in monitoring and supervising their children’s access to the internet.

Internet pornography is a lucrative industry. Though precise statistics are unavailable, it is estimated that the global industry generates up to $100 billion every year. Alarmingly, the Philippines has become a major producer and distributor of pornography, especially of child pornography, where it is now among the top ten countries for the production of online child pornography.[19] One study has found that child pornography in our country is fueled by foreign and local perpetrators who are exploiting poor and vulnerable families and their children.[20] These are Filipino children whose innocence has been consumed for the pleasure of others.

The restorative power of Jesus Christ, the Face of God’s Mercy

Many men, women, and children have been wounded and corrupted by pornography. They have discovered that the destructive effects of pornography on the soul are long lived and deep. The use of pornography, especially if it is addictive, is a common cause of shame and self-loathing. It wounds families, communities, and entire societies. It makes prayer difficult. Often, it is linked to other wounds, personal, psychological, and emotional, which together may seem insurmountable and unconquerable. However, in this Jubilee Year of Mercy, the Catholic Church in the Philippines is called once again to affirm and to proclaim the healing power of Jesus Christ, who is the face of God’s mercy.[21]

To those who have been exploited and victimized by the pornography industry, nothing that you have done
to you can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus! (Cf. Rom. 8:35) You remain and will always be a cherished and beloved child of God created in his image and likeness.

The Father of Mercies is waiting to forgive and to heal the wounds in your heart so that you may discover and experience authentic love. To you, we the Catholic Bishops of the Philippines pledge that we will continue to work to eradicate the grave evil of pornography from our land. Thus, the Episcopal Commission on Family and Life is tasked to consider programs against the scourge of pornography.

To those who make and distribute pornography, you should heed the stark warning of the Lord Jesus: 

"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Matt. 18:6). However, this is the same Lord who instructed the Apostle Peter to forgive his brother not seven but seventy times seven times (Matt. 18:22).

God is calling you today to reject this industry of filth and corruption. No sin is too great to forgive, but with the help of grace, like the Prodigal Son, you must first come to your senses, arise, and return to the Father (cf. Lk. 15: 11-32). Repentance is an essential ingredient for receiving forgiveness.

To those who struggle with pornography, do not allow shame, fear, or pride, to prevent you from returning to God, the Father of Mercies, who loves you beyond all your other loves. The Gospel challenges all of us to live a life of chastity. Self-mastery is a long and exacting work that can become an especially difficult challenge in a culture saturated with sexual images.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church recommends several means to cultivate the virtue of chastity: self-knowledge, the practice of self-denial adapted to the situations that confront us, obedience to God's commandments, the exercise of the moral virtues, and fidelity to prayer.

Have recourse to the sacraments regularly, especially the sacrament of confession, to receive the strength and courage from God to help you in your trials. Entrust yourself to the patronage of St. Thomas Aquinas and the Blessed Virgin Mary, who have long been linked to the pursuit of holy chastity.

Finally, and most importantly, we are all called to rely on God's grace and power to resist and to overcome sexual temptation so that we may imitate Jesus Christ who was perfectly chaste and perfectly pure. Chastity is a virtue that is perfected by God working with us and in us. It is God who will complete what he has already begun in us.

May Mary Mother of Life, Virgin Most Pure bring us to the heart of Jesus her Son who promised that the pure of heart will be able to see God!

From the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, Ash Wednesday, February 10, 2016

+SOCRATES B. VILLEGAS

Archbishop of Lingayen - Dagupan President, Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines

[10] Ibid.
[22] CCC, §2342.
[23] CCC, §2340.
[24] The Angelic Warfare Confraternity is a supernatural fellowship of men and women bound to one another in love and dedicated to pursuing and promoting chastity together under the powerful patronage of St. Thomas Aquinas and the Blessed Virgin Mary. For details go to the website of the confraternity: http://www.angelicwarfareconfraternity.org/
A question of choice

ALL EGOISTIC CLAIMS AND DELUSIONAL ACCLAMATIONS to the contrary, the dreadful heirloom of the pitiful people of the Philippines from the previous administrations—the still existing one very well included—is a three-cornered national liability in terms of gross dishonesty in government, resulting in pervasive poverty among the people and the pursuant emergence of criminality all over the country. Graft and corrupt practices in government take place as a matter of course. Destitution and misery among the citizens come about as the eventual consequences of governance for personal gains instead of public service. Criminals—dangerous and deadly—then come to fore, causing more social havoc and unrest among the already downtrodden people.

On the occasion of the fast-approaching 2016 Elections, the candidates for national offices, in particular, such as the Office of the President and the Office of the Vice President, have all started proclaiming their personal attributes, their individual opted program of government with their professed priority agenda when elected. At this juncture, it is but right and proper to point out that said proclamations are either credible or incredible, tenable or untenable. But whatever they be and whoever makes them, the more fundamental questions to ask are the following: First, who is the candidate who sounds credible and tenable? Second, who is the candidate who appears competent and sincere? Third, who is the candidate who seems to be active and diligent?

This is not to seek any superhuman to govern the country, to lead a nation, to serve a people. This is simply intended to say that there is an urgent and ardent need for voters to see beyond personalities and to listen through but rhetorical proclamations—considering the deadly realities of dishonesty, poverty, and criminality that crucify the Filipinos 24/7, that makes the Philippines a big liability for honest business to come and an enriching industry to stay, that make Filipinos but profitable OFWs. This is to emphasize the ground reality that it is about time for the voters to look and see beyond the mask and façade of those seeking their support, wooing their votes.

One election after another and the country is anything but a place where truth prevails, where justice rules and peace reigns. And one government after another and the Filipinos are still looking for competence and integrity in their leaders, especially at the national level. Question: Why is it that the really able and truly honest individuals shun from politics? Answer: It is precisely because politics in this country has become synonymous with incompetence and dishonesty. Or to say it with all sincerity and truth, Philippine politics equals graft and corruption. This is sad but true. This is a pity but it is the reality.

Will there ever be a time when candidates for election—once elected into office—will prove that politics in the country is in the realm of the ability to govern, the capacity to lead, the honesty to serve? Is this but an “impossible dream”? Would that such still remain in the sphere of the possible—in the domain of the probable even. Then, there is still hope for the Filipinos as a people. Hence, the imperative for the voters to cast their votes wisely and see to it that their votes are well counted.
A social media firestorm erupted this month over “People’s Champ” Manny Pacquiao who called the LGBT community “worse than animals.”

In a TV5 interview he said in Filipino: “It’s common sense. Do you see animals mating with the same sex? Animals are better because they can distinguish male from female.”

Reactions tweeted and posted on social media included those from celebrities like comedian Vice Ganda, singers Aiza Seguerra and Lea Salonga. Pacquiao who is running for Senate in the upcoming May elections apologized shortly after. In a tweet, the boxer turned Saranggani Congressman said: “I’m sorry for hurting people by comparing homossexuals to animals. Please forgive me for those I’ve hurt. God Bless!”

Here are some of the reactions:

Lord, we pray for this nation. We pray for the world to come to repentance and seek you more. #PrayforMannyPacquiao ~ @CBNAsia

The guy already apologized. Let him speak the dictates of his conscience. He opposes SSM the same way you advocate 4 it.#PrayForMannyPacquiao ~ JazzyJean Rey @JazzyJean8

It’s just that he bravely spoke about what he believes so what’s the problem with that? #PrayForMannyPacquiao ~ Charmaine Mendoza @cyrene_xx

We can use the “beauty of apologetics,” just as Pope Benedict XVI has recommended. #PrayForMannyPacquiao ~ 100%KATOLIKONGPINOY! @katolikongpinoy

Respect. #PrayForMannyPacquiao ~ f.e.e.l.s@fyyifeelings

RESPECT #PrayForMannyPacquiao ~ PINOY PATAMA @MgaPinoyPatama

@im_kharia Hi. What’s with the hashtag #PrayForMannyPacquiao HAHA ~ Kimm @bllstrsKim

anong nangyayare? bat may ganito? #PrayForMannyPacquiao ~ Lj @JaTheaRaStro_

oo nga #PrayForMannyPacquiao ~ RUNNERLOVER @IamYevrreh

Take a stand. I DONT agree with @mannypacquiao in many matters including his views on same-sex couples. #PrayForMannyPacquiao ~ @Senyora

Hahaha mag tr-trend na to #PrayForMannyPacquiao ~ @lovelybaysrel

What’s happening? #PrayForMannyPacquiao ~ Bimboy Gerarcas @itsmebimbee

Stand for the truth, @mannypacquiao ! Never balk for following what God wills! #PrayForMannyPacquiao ~ JazzyJean Rey @JazzyJean8
How The Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe

IRELAND IS KNOWN FOR ST. PATRICK'S DAY, people with a hearty laugh and wry humor to go with it, not to mention the famous Irish stout, Guinness but few people would probably associate this country of lush, rolling green hills, castles and ancient sites with civilization or scholarship. This 246-page book by Thomas Cahill is set to turn your perception of Ireland on its head. The author, in a way that only a passionately hardcore historian could do, presents this non-fiction historical book in such an entertaining and riveting manner you'd actually put down the book and wonder: “This all actually happened.”

For an Asian far removed from the socio-political upheavals that shaped the land that is now known as Europe, I was engaged by the text at a visceral level, seeing the events of history played out as both psychological drama and socio-political bonanza for key people who would play major roles on the world stage. At the book's start, the colossal Roman Empire has toppled due to its own immense weight and hubris, leaving a cavernous vacuum to be filled—culturally, politically, and socially. While the Huns and the Germanic tribes (Visigoths, Franks, Angles, Saxons, Ostrogoths) wreak havoc on what is left of the Roman Empire, a pivotal revolution of scholarship is taking place in an insulated island called Ireland that had been converted mainly because of one magnetic character: St. Patrick. The fact that the Irish became Catholics sans the pressure of Roman might is in itself astonishing; it was the first such massive conversion of its kind. What could bring it about? Before becoming the saint credited by hagiographies with driving out all the snakes from Ireland, St. Patrick was an Anglo-Saxon abducted from what is present-day England and was forced to work as a shepherd boy in Ireland where his own conversion took place—at the edge of survival, biting cold, and constant danger. Who else is one's hope in the face of life-threatening desperation but God? He would eventually escape walking hundreds of miles, led on by a mysterious voice that said: “Your ship is ready...” St. Patrick would eventually enter the priesthood in Britain and return to his "second home", the land of Cuchulainn and Deirdre.

It would be because of Ireland's conversion that the country would become the perfect nesting place for a literary revolution never before seen. After St. Patrick, St. Columba would take his place as a champion of monastic communities where countless hermits, brothers, priests, and even students would bend over a Greek or Roman text and painstakingly copy the literature for future generations. According to Cahill, this is primarily how much of what we recognize to be ancient literature survived. The wealth of learning amassed by the Roman Empire was fast disappearing because of Huns' and Germanic tribes' lootings and burning, making Ireland a haven of scholarly preservation. At the height of this era, Ireland was attracting students from all over Europe, quickly becoming “a land of saints and scholars.”

The book is a lot of fun and fascination and it doesn't hurt a bit that it expands one's notion of the intertwining of the growth and development of the Christian faith and European culture. That said, this book calls for a Guinness. (Reviewed by Nirva'ana Delacruz)
**The Revenant**

Director: Alejandro Iñarritu  
Cast: Leonardo DiCaprio, Tom Hardy, Will Poulter  
Story: Based on The Revenant by Michael Punke  
Screenplay: Mark Smith, Alejandro G. Iñarritu  
Cinematography: Emmanuel Lubezki  
Editing: Stephen Mirrione  
Music: Ryuichi Sakamoto, Alva Noto  
Producers: Arnon Milchan, Steve Golin, et al  
Genre: Epic Drama  
Location: 18th Century Louisiana  
Distributor: 20th Century Fox  
Running Time: 156 minutes  
Technical assessment: 4  
Moral assessment: 3.5  
CINEMA Rating: V18

**The Film Opens with Hugh Glass** (DiCaprio) telling his half-breed son not to give up as long as he is breathing. Through a collage of images, we see how he loses his wife and cares for his young son, Hawk. A few years later, Glass and a teenage Hawk are part of team hunting for pelts in the Louisiana wilderness until they are ambushed by Native Americans searching for the chief’s kidnapped daughter. With only 10 men remaining, the party relies on Glass’ expertise and experience to lead them to safety. However, when Glass is brutally mauled by a grizzly bear, the team captain is forced to leave him behind in order for them to be able to safely return to camp. Hawk, Bridger (Poulter) and Fitzgerald (Hardy) volunteer to stay behind, care for Glass and give him a proper burial when the time comes. However, Fitzgerald, being hostile to both father and son, convinces the injured Glass to be killed so that the three of them can move on. When he smothers Glass, Hawk arrives thinking his father is being murdered and tries to call for help. But Fitzgerald stabs him to death as Glass watches helplessly. Fitzgerald convinces the young Bridger that Hawk has gone missing and they should leave Glass to die. Glass slowly recovers from his injuries and makes a resolve to make Fitzgerald pay for the murder of his son.

There is a poetic mix of calm and brutality in director Iñarritu’s art. He brings out the core of human struggle with calm precision that it chokes you out of your emotions. The Revenant is divinely genius. Cinematography is majestic and intuitive. It combines the arresting beauty of the Old World and the dynamism of the scene in images that you see and don’t see. Sound design is meticulously laid out, resulting in a rich dramatization. The storytelling, although a little longer than necessary, manages to pierce through the soul. But the main success of the movie is DiCaprio’s Glass. He attacks the character with so much commitment and intensity so that every pain, every heartbreak, and every rage is felt by the audience. But more importantly, each element, although a stand out by itself, works cohesively to tell the story and does not draw attention to itself. The Revenant is a movie that will surely be a classic for film studies in the future.

The strongest message of the film is told at the very beginning: “as long as you can breathe, you fight”. This is man’s indomitable spirit to stay alive. There are several motivations to do so: self-preservation, protecting a loved one, seeking justice and rectification and hunger for revenge. The film took us to all of them, perhaps one more prominently that the other. That determination to hang on, the courage to fight and the will to live takes heart, mind and soul and the deep sense of spirituality that allows man to transcend every inch of physical and emotional pain. While it does not explicitly acknowledge God, images of the Church, reference to conscience through inner voices and the words that Glass remembers before he decides not to kill Fitzgerald implicitly suggest His presence. Other sub themes worth discussing are respect for environment and culture, love for family, friendship and loyalty. However, the film graphically presents interracial war, sexual assault, and death, that younger audience will feel disturbed. Hence, CINEMA recommends the film to more mature viewers.
**MYANMAR. Good Shepherd sisters celebrate 150 years of mission**

A century and a half ago, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd took their mission of evangelization and service to what is now Myanmar, or Burma. This year, they're celebrating their anniversary jubilee in the country. "The journey of 150 years reminds us to honor the past, celebrating the present and to nurture a legacy of our mission for the future with hope," Sister Elizabeth Joseph, RGS, told CNA Jan. 19. On Jan. 16 the sisters held a jubilee thanksgiving Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral in Yangon. Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, the Archbishop of Yangon, said the Mass. The Good Shepherd sisters launched a year of spiritual preparation for the jubilee. Its members reflected on themes like "Rooted in God and in Reality," "Remembering the Past with Gratitude," "Embracing Challenges with Hope" and "Taking Risks Together for Mission." (CNA)

**JORDAN. Gov't says it cannot continue to bear brunt of Syrian refugee crisis**

As a donors conference to stem the Syrian refugee crisis opens in London, Syria's neighbors, which have hosted hundreds of thousands of refugees for the past five years, say they cannot continue to bear the brunt of the burden. King Abdullah II of Jordan, one of dozens of world leaders set to participate in the Feb. 4 gathering, has warned that his country is now at a "boiling point." "Sooner or later, I think, the dam is going to burst," he told the BBC, saying the refugee influx engulfing Jordan is draining it of funds, vital social services, education and health care. And it's not just Syrians coming: Iraqis and others fleeing violence in the aftermath of the Arab Spring uprisings still seek shelter in the cash-strapped, oil-poor kingdom. (CNS)

**PHILIPPINES. At close of congress, pope urges Catholics to be missionaries to world**

Pope Francis urged Catholic families and young people, especially in the Philippines, to go out and be missionaries to the world. In a video message to the closing Mass of the 51st International Eucharistic Congress, the pope said Christ's presence is a promise of everlasting joy and peace, and a summons. "It is also a summons to go forth as missionaries to bring forth the message of the father's tenderness, forgiveness and mercy to every man, woman and child," he said Jan. 31 as the crowd of about 1 million focused on large video screens. "How much our world needs this message," Pope Francis said Filipinos have been an example of fidelity and deep devotion. (CNS)

**INDONESIA. UN award proposed for Aceh fishermen who saved sea migrants**

Fishermen in Indonesia's Aceh province have been nominated for a United Nations award for rescuing hundreds of migrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh stranded in Indonesian waters. The Aceh-based humanitarian group Geutanyoe Foundation had proposed the fishermen as candidates for the 2016 Nansen Refugee Award from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR), the group's international director Lilianne Fan said on Feb. 13. "If they hadn't been rescued by the Aceh fishermen, the lives of the children and the Rohingya people and Bangladeshis may not have been saved," she is quoted as saying. (Asianews)

**MALAYSIA. Archbishop: Support for the family, against chaos**

The family is the "foundation of society. When family units are broken, the order of society and the world will be in chaos," said Mgr John Wong, archbishop of Kota Kinabalu (Sabah State, eastern Malaysia), in his message for the lunar New Year, which falls on 8 February this year. "Celebrating the Chinese New Year," writes the prelate, "there are two important reasons to put emphasis on the family. The first is that in the tradition and customs of the Chinese Lunar Year revolves around the family reunion and its units; the second is that last October in Rome, Pope Francis has met the Synod of Bishops with the theme of family, and I will have attended." "At this turn of the season," Mgr Wong adds, "people are generally preoccupied with planning. What is your plan? I hope that your plan will include building a family of faith and happiness." (Asianews)

**SAUDI ARABIA. Saudi water resources at risk, to run out in 13 years**

Groundwater in the Kingdom will run out over the next 13 years, leaving the country high and dry, this according to a water expert at King Faisal University, a public university whose main campus is in the city of Hofuf in the Eastern Province (ash-Sharqiyyah). Mohammed Al-Ghamdi, a faculty member at KFU, made the comments in the wake of a sobering report issued by the World Bank on global natural water scarcity, particularly in Gulf countries that have some of the highest rate of water consumption per capita in the world. Gulf Co-operation Countries are seeing the largest gaps between renewable water supply and demand, where Bahrain used 220 per cent of its renewable water reserves versus 943 per cent in the Kingdom and 2,465 per cent in Kuwait. "Official estimates have been disclosed showing an acute drop in water levels in agricultural areas, and that indicates the seriousness of the situation," Al-Ghamdi said. "This is a dangerous situation for all future crops that depend on these aquifers." (Asianews)

**INDONESIA. Christians, Muslims for responsible parenthood in lieu of birth control**

Family planning "should not be reduced only to the issue of birth control, but must embrace a broad roadmap for married couples, including advice on how to raise healthy children, how to become integrated in society, and how to help families prosper economically," said Fr. Hibertus Hartono MSF, a member of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference (KWI"). The clergyman spoke to AsiaNews following the Fourth International Conference on Family Planning, which was held for the first time in Indonesia from 25 to 28 January 2016. Sumanto Al Qurtuby, a local Muslim scholar, said that Islam is also concerned about the problem of overpopulation. Even in Islam, there is the concept of al-mashaliilul Ammah, i.e. the common good. "The number of people in a country or individuals in a family is a crucial point in Islam," he said. As for the Church, for the Muslim scholar, the focus is not so much on birth control but on educating couples towards responsible parenthood. (Asianews)