

ECONOMIC JUSTICE
In the New Evangelization Paradigm
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Feast of the Lord's Ascension, Sunday, May 20, 2012

"Now at last He takes His throne, alleluia...!" all communities of the priory sang around the refectory table and concluded the prayer with "May we always lovingly fix our gaze on Him even as we take in this food as a source of energy in our journey towards Him..." My community then sat down to breakfast, the gospel of the day's Great *Aussendung* ringing in the ear of our hearts. "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature." (Mk 16:15) Archbishop Chito Tagle talks about evangelizing the culture; who's evangelizing this world-size caboodle of a human-crafted creature called the economy? The *Lineamenta* for the 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization invites us to discern.

Archbishop Nikola Eterovic opens his Preface to the *Lineamenta* with the self-same parting words (*huling habilin*) of Jesus, Matthew's version: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

The priest who presided over the three Benedictine communities at Marikina in the celebration of the Eucharist had his own version of what the two angels said to the stunned disciples, still gawking at the sky after Jesus had disappeared into the clouds: "Oy, *bakit kayo nakatanga pa dyan?* Go back *na kayo* to the world; make disciples of all nations like He said. Go!" The Sisters of my community remarked at lunch how this adapted, spliced version of Acts 1:11 and Mt 28:19,20 kept re-echoing in their minds in the silence of our monastic breakfast.

Archbishop Eterovic, in his Preface to the *Lineamenta*, points out that the *missio ad gentes* is a mandate for all Christians, not for the Apostles only. Citing *Ad Gentes* of the Second Vatican Council, he says all Christians "not only are to provide the support of their prayers and material resources to missionaries... but are themselves called to contribute to spreading the Kingdom of God in the world, **each according to his proper vocations and means...**" (Underscoring supplied). Clearly I should not ask who the Church sends out into the Global Village for evangelizing the economy. "This task has a particular urgency in the present phase of globalization..." (*Lineamenta*, "Preface," par. 5) Let's not forget that the globalization of information and technology was begotten by, and is powered by, the globalization of the economy. That makes the discernment process quite complex.

So what's my very own contribution, what's yours, exactly where you and I are, down on the ground in our own small way, to this evangelizing or GoodNews-ifying (huh?) of the Philippine economy? To each her/his own answer. And ways of discernment. Why should we ask ourselves this question? Because the *Lineamenta* points out, "a fourth sector (of six) in which changes call for the Church's evangelizing activity is the economy." Because the *Lineamenta* calls us to discern new ways of "being Church" also in the arena of the economy. "The Church must not lose her capacity of remaining close to people in their daily lives so as to announce in that very place the life-giving message of the Gospel." (*Lineamenta*, Chapter I, # 9, "New Ways of "Being Church")

Volumes and volumes have been written about economic justice by its articulators of different religions, scholars, social scientists, social change catalysts of different persuasions and, especially for us Catholics, in encyclicals and varied documents comprising the social teaching of the Church. The subject

is too big for a *Conversatio* article, too heavy for missionaries balancing a monastic lifestyle with multiple tasks and getting enough sleep for the night. Hence the focus and the attempt to lighten the language of this discussion paper. It is from the standpoint of the poor who, Jesus says, we will always have with us, in our neighborhoods.

The Prep Co of our Twelfth General Chapter is wise in telling us that our discussions on the “six sectors” of the *Lineamenta* should be done on the background of *Conversatio Morum*. With that at the back of our minds, this discussion paper limits itself to reflecting on economic justice not from a social science framework but from the worldview of a Judaeo-Christian religious heritage, within a conceptual framework that is a school of thought propounded by the Church *Magisterium* as The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith.

What then should be my specific contribution to evangelical justice-making in the economy sector? The question popped up in the reflective silence of our monastic breakfast. Maybe it was provoked by the gospel of Ascension Sunday. One by one, I saw in my mind’s eye the faces of people whose daily lives touch mine out there in my places of ministry, Marikina and beyond. While I relished, yes, a serving of canned peaches, maple syrup on buttered pancake, yummy (more pricey) rice with bacon, lettuce and eggs that Sr. Alexis and Jessel, our Girl Friday, happily prepared for us “*e kasi* it’s Ascension Sunday.” Just as I relished *malunggay lauya* three times a day in Mati. Ah, the blessings of community!

At every feast day meal I wish that every single family in this country were having a good, nutritious, delicious meal, too. Fruit of their toil as the food on our table is fruit of our community’s labor. As a Bavarian farmer and his family enjoy the good food and the simple elegance of their dining room, fruit of their toil. There’s the rub. Our misionary toil—the hard, high pressure jobs we do—enables us, entitles us to good food, a homey, spirit-sheltering home, the middle class amenities we enjoy. And that’s right and just. Whereas a huge lot of people out there, nearby in Brgy. Tumana or far away in all the remote *barangays de Aparri hasta Jolo*, toil hard and long but are disabled from laying claim on good food, the kind of shelter and amenities they, too, deserve. That is what’s not right and just. If I’m able to lay claim on such it is **only because of belonging to an enabling community** with a communal sharing of goods.

If we are to help in the economic empowerment of urban or rural poor along the highways and byways of *Daang Matuwid* (a Biblical term, by the way); if we are to steer a lot (tch-tch!) of employees away from the bogs of endless debts (*sandig sa madre* and salary deductions) incurred to keep up with the Joneses, the *teleserye* models; if we are to help families make order and keep proper order (right and just) in home economics that raises the quality of life, of personhood, the only *daan ng pagtutuwid* (way of setting aright) is in the gospel terrain of building **enabling** communities. Our icons for this are the luminous Early Christian ecclesial base communities established by the Apostles, the latter-day Jewish *kibbutz* inspired by Old testament ideals, and the self-contained, self-reliant, justpeace-making monastic communities (*cenobia*) built by St. Benedict and next-generation Benedictines. Their micro-economics paradigm is a gift to the world. Only in a nation composed of such communities can economic justice come about. But the doable prospects of this deserve another discussion not possible here.

Speaking of PNoy’s *Daang Matuwid* administration, former Secretary of Finance Roberto F. de Ocampo, OBE, recipient of performance awards repeatedly, writes in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, May 19, 2012: “While we can all take pride in the remarkable heights achieved at the stock exchange, the exceptionally large levels of international reserves, the strength of the peso and the continuing reduction of the fiscal deficit, none of these has made much of a dent in improving the situation prevailing among the “gut issues” of poverty reduction, job creation and the capability to meet basic needs. These issues are the main day-to-day concerns of the overwhelming majority of Filipinos.”

Comments Denis Murphy in the Inquirer's Opinion section: "In a democracy, and in the Church, authority is expected to guarantee that the poor are given priority. 'As they have less in life, they should have more in law,' President Ramon Magsaysay once said." (PDI, May 19, 2012) The most respectable commentaries such as these do not lay the blame on the PNoy administration, aware that the current economic woes and the unjust social structures that spawn them are inherited from previous administrations. They are meant to challenge a credible President to address them and directly link the fight against corruption to dismantling the unjust structures in the political and economic order that cause massive poverty. Stamp out corruption to purge out greed to further the agenda of economic justice.

Basically supportive of President Aquino, Roberto de Ocampo points out: "The most recent SWS survey of unemployment found adult unemployment at 24%, or about 10 million, to have increased from about the level of 20% the previous year. Furthermore, the most recent SWS survey on the poverty situation found that families rating themselves as poor rose to 55% or 10 points higher than the 45% of just six months earlier." (PDI, May 19, 2012) Such bad-news trends, and certainly more, are felt not only in the Philippines. With the financial crisis, first in the USA, now in Europe, a much bigger percentage of the global population has gotten poorer despite unprecedented progress in technology and production output advertised as improvement of human life.

No need to belabor it here. The bad news about the economy, global and national, is daily fare in our newspapers and broadcast media. We, together with the people we serve, live it. Anguished or cynical, these people ask: can justice ever come about? Whatever good news that can be found in current events is overwhelmed or even get canceled out by the bad. There is only denouncing and denouncing. The announcing of good news, the alternatives that good people are trying to push, seem exercises in futility.

We can only challenge them with the teaching of the Church that they themselves are to evangelize the hopeless situation. We cannot lecture this to them. We can only do with them a read-along on how God passes judgment on the mess that people make of the human situation. Fortunately, the assurance from God's word in Scriptures that God is on their side calms them.

The great numbers of people, whole communities of indigenous peoples among them, who lost their lands to influential land-grabbers, mining companies, real estate developers, logging companies, with under-cover help from bribed government bureaucrats, are agitated but comforted by the prophet, Isaiah's accusation: "Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you... Ah, you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter... who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of their rights!" (Is 5:8ff), and a prophetic string of imminent karma follows.

"Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right... What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come... to whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth...?" (Is 10:1-3) The poor take comfort in the reversals of fortune that God steers.

They laugh about this diatribe against a degenerate culture, identifying the images with what they see on television; it gives them a sense of poetic justice except for the horrid karmic pronouncements: "The Lord said: Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks... tinkling with their feet; the Lord will afflict with scabs the heads of the daughters of Zion, and the Lord will lay bare their secret parts. In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands and the crescents; the pendants, the bracelets and the scarfs; the headdresses, the armlets, the sashes, the perfume boxes and the amulets; the signet rings and nose rings; the festal robes, the mantles, the cloaks and the handbags; the garments of gauze, the linen garments, the turbans and the veils. Instead of perfume there

will be a stench; and instead of a sash, a rope; instead of well-set hair, baldness; and instead of a rich robe, a binding of sackcloth; instead of beauty, shame.” (Is. 3:16-24)

And this one is for persons in high places accused of heinous sins against the nation, who arrange to have video clips and front-page newspaper photos of themselves kneeling with closed eyes at Mass, kissing the hand of a bishop: “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord. Trample my courts no more; I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity... your appointed festivals my soul hates... even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” (Is. 2:11a,12-17)

Dispossessed farmers hearken to this, from the farmer-prophet, Amos: “I hate, I despise your festivals... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Am. 5:21, 23-24)

But the perspectives of societal reversals articulated by Old Testament prophetic utterance change in the New Testament’s radically new unfolding of the economy of salvation and of letting justice roll down like a torrent. At the threshold is that of Mary’s *Magnificat*: “He has scattered the proud in the conceits of their heart. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” With Jesus the reversals generated and proclaimed were startling in their radicality.

The organized poor, learning to be transmitters of the Good News, whose social consciousness is still in a simplistic societal reversals paradigm, happily realize at Gospels read-along that Jesus was a poor but learned carpenter, born a squatter in someone else’s stable, died a squatter in someone else’s tomb. A group of KMU-organized factory workers in Laguna, not learning to be Gospel transmitters but no longer simplistic, wishing to get the viewpoint of the Church’s social teaching (they were Catholics) on labor and capital, the relations of production, invited then Bishop Chito Tagle of Imus to give them a talk. They were impressed. After the bishop left, at an internalization session one asked, “If Jesus were born Filipino and of our generation, where would he be at a strike?” Answer: “In the morning he would be in Banaybanay chatting with our wives and playing with our children, early afternoon he will be arguing with management or DOLE officials, sounding like Bishop Tagle; in the evening at the picket line roasting fish barbecue for us.”

Jesus has an entirely new, utterly paradoxical approach to *pagtutuwid* (setting right, rectifying) even Mary his mother and John the Baptist, both closest to his mission, misunderstood. For instance, he relentlessly veered his followers and anyone who cared to hear from *sandig-sa-Torah* that was so burdened with legal additives they curdled response to God and made bonsai of the human spirit. This and the startling new meanings he gave to most everything they took for granted, his beatitudes, his unheard of alternatives to all that the Jews had sacralized, which he proclaimed in walkathon sermons on mountainsides, lakeside and deserted lowlands enraged the priestly class, the two parties of Pharisees and Saducees, disappointed the Zealots, scandalized even his relatives.

Jesus ruthlessly skewered the powers-that-be in the political and economic order of his time but he was also very gentle, so full of understanding and nuanced in his relating with all kinds of people in all strata of society at all levels of liberation from sin and God-seeking and growing fully human. Even his closest associates could not follow his GoodNews proclamation, much less transmit it (that would come only at Pentecost) but even with the dimmest understanding, with a few precious moments of dawning insight, their fascination with him never waned; they continued to stake themselves, their time, their

resources, to his Person and mission. Thus an ever expanding community of believers with vacillating faith and commitment spontaneously got formed around his person.

Is this something the poor of our society can appreciate? Can Jesus and his paradoxes inspire their struggle for social justice and genuine development? You'd be surprised. Find out from the BECs of Marihatag from the poblacion all the way to the Mount Diwata range. The New Evangelization for the transmission of the faith got to them before the *Lineamenta* papers got to us.

Decades of *lectio* can never exhaust all the insights we can gather about the Person of Jesus, his paradoxical ways of relating with people, things, events, the contradictions of being human as an individual or a society. And so all the insights we can share with our associates and mission partners especially the poor about Jesus, his proclamation, the hallmarks of discipleship, his mandate to all of us Christians, will never get exhausted. Translated into ministry it is proclaiming new meanings for very specific and concrete human situations, which is God's-meanings that got lost in transmission, which is what evangelizing the culture is about. Economic and political justice, which is GoodNews being-brought-about, is subsumed to it. The economic justice agenda, the ecology agenda get formulated in the process. The change-agent disciple must learn Christ, will suffer, will learn to labor and to wait.

Karl Gaspar, professor of Economics who bloomed into a well-known lay theologian in a Martial Law prison had this to say in 1984, still true today: "In fact the long-term future does not point to a land of milk and honey unless there is drastic change in the social structures leading to a more equitable distribution of wealth. But this is unlikely...Christ's pain is felt by those who are pushed to the bottom. His suffering is experienced by those who don't count in the arena of commerce and politics, and whose rights as human beings are made dispensable by the dictates of 'national security.' His anxiety is in the hearts of mothers who intuitively know that their children will suffer the same wretched life and will never see the day when they can provide them with a better tomorrow." Karl had that same fascination with Jesus and His mission. He wanted to be a monastic, a Trappist maybe? when released from prison, ended up a Redemptorist professed Brother.

The fascination of Fr. Ernesto Cardenal and the barrio folk of Solentiname in Nicaragua with the Person of Jesus, His judgment and message on the human situation in Nicaragua so fascinated in turn the international solidarity movement in Europe that the Germans recorded and published it in a book entitled, The Gospel of Solentiname. The impoverished Nicaraguans overthrew the oppressive Somoza regime. Composing songs and poems is natural to the common folk; they celebrated their struggle, not only the victory, in poetry and fiesta-sounding songs. The desired economic justice is still far away.

Karl Gaspar again writing from prison: "For the disciple, the ultimate hope lies in the unfolding of God's Kingdom. Beyond the sorrow, sickness and hunger, beyond the depressions, defeats and disasters of this present world is the fulfillment of the words of the prophets that in the days to come Yahweh will reign... As we struggle to become liberated from the greed, absolute power and dominance of the few who control millions of people, and to be liberated from dehumanization and marginalization—we come to realize that the Reign of God is close at hand."

It may be said that the Reign of God, the human condition where loving relationships, justice and peace reign, is prefigured by the early Christian communities of Apostolic times. Their hallmark traits: "They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers." (Acts 2:42) "They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as any had need." (Acts 2:45) "Now the whole group of those who believed was of one heart and soul, and none claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common." (Acts 4:32) These should also be the basic traits of the enabling communities we are building among the

poor. Only in such communities is it possible to set up the social structures and mechanisms of economic justice on micro scale.

We Benedictines have been specially equipped by the Rule of Benedict for the formation of such communities. The Benedictine community is hewn closely after those of the Early Church. Nineteen chapters of the Rule deal directly with economic matters. Chapters 2, 31, 71 and 72 touch on aspects of economic justice in the monastery. It is very empowering for community workers to grasp their full import and apply the transformative practices. A seasoned trade union organizer whose eyes fell on an open copy of the Rule on an office desk caught sight of Chapter 33, “Monks and Private Ownership” and picked up the book. Across the page was Chapter 34, “Distribution of Goods According to Need.” Then and there he read the Rule from cover to cover. Not content, he borrowed it. I don’t know if Sr. Fe Andrea Collantes ever got her copy back.

When we can no longer gather and **steer** the formation, mobilization and expanding of enabled/enabling communities of believers because, like headless chickens all, we are so busy with the business of livelihood-for-the-poor, thinking-for-the-poor, earning for them, solving their problems for them, administering endless crisis intervention loans, we should close Tuason Community Center, I told the staff several times. There is no reason to close, thank God.

To those who can find time to read is recommended James B. Mc Ginnis’ **BREAD & JUSTICE: Towards a New International Economic Order**. The blurb says the book “examines the causes of hunger and poverty, describes the kind of global changes that must take place to eradicate these ills, and offers ways in which the concerned citizen—you—can work towards this goal.” The book presents some answers. It “explains some of the national and international policies that have brought us to our present crisis. It tells about the real effects of hunger and poverty. It examines what the Gospel and the Christian religious tradition tell us about justice among people.” The book has an impressive bibliography.

“If we consider only its aspects of economy and production, globalization is a negative phenomenon,” remarks the *Lineamenta*. More so when we consider that the globalization of the economy was deliberately established by economic and political power blocs of the eight most industrialized and powerful nations to intensify their exploitation of developing and underdeveloped nations. “However, in a positive sense, globalization can be viewed as an occasion for growth, in which humanity **can learn to develop new forms of solidarity and new ways to share the development of everything for the greater good of all...** (Underscoring supplied. *Lineamenta*, Chapter I, # 6)

Suggested focus question for sharing: (but your community may have its own)

Economic justice can only come about in a Civilization of Love. What structures of care and social blessing are there in the Rule of Benedict and in our present Benedictine community’s practices

- manifest the Civilization of Love expanding to our field of apostolate?
- provide alternatives to the unjust social structures as our contribution to evangelizing the economy?

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