

## Reflections on Poverty

Tourists visiting in Manila praise the luxurious hotels, beautiful resorts, Philippine delicacies at reasonable prices, cheap transportation, exotic stores and markets, modern shopping plazas. Manila has everything a dollar can buy.

Tourists are great sight-seers, but they aren't in the habit of visiting slums, squatter areas or garbage dumps the places where the teeming masses live. They don't go to the rural areas and ride in a bumpy jeep just to see how the peasants eke out an existence.

Poverty is not a tourist attraction. It is an overwhelming social blight, and even more difficult to cope with. The world of the poor is a world all by itself.

Today's world is divided into two groups the "have's" and the "have-nots". The gap between these two groups is enormous intellectual, social, spiritual, economic. But the have-nots are no longer satisfied with their lot. They are going through "a revolution of rising expectations".

Radio and TV have opened new horizons. The poor are learning that there is a different world besides their own. Occasionally they visit towns and stroll around modern shopping plazas. They see stores selling the latest appliances and gadgets.

Who are the have-nots? How do they live? Do they have a future? What is our Christian responsibility?

In the cities, many of the poor live in squatter areas in makeshift homes to escape paying rent. In the Barrios, they live in nipa huts or in shacks made of pieces of board, sheet metal, flattened out tin cans, or whatever can be used for a wall or roof.

Come and visit with me a residence of a poor family living in a nipa hut. One or two rooms. Two broken down chairs. Mats for sleeping. They are rolled up each morning and put on the rafters. A small mirror and a few photos of relatives on the walls. A statue of a saint and few candles. A small portable radio. A kerosene lamp. No toilet facilities. No electricity. No running water. A few pigs wallow in the mud under the hut. Scrawny chickens scratch away in the yard. Children, dressed in rags, play in the mud. Food is cooked over a few sticks. A typical residence.

What is the lifestyle of the have-nots? Their diet is meager rice, fish and a few vegetables. They cannot afford to count calories. Only the rich can afford such a luxury. Their life expectancy is low. They have no savings. Two thirds of their low income budget is required for food, transportation: to purchase fuel, water, medicine. They are politically unsophisticated. Their values are traditional and static. They are not easily persuaded to change their lifestyle.

The poor masses are the disinherited, the landless, the shirtless, the sharecroppers, the sugar cane cutters, the semi-literates.

How do the have-nots make their living? They are the peddlers, carrying their wares around on a pole. They are the street vendors who set up their stalls on the sidewalks. They are the sari-sari store operators, selling single cigarettes, candies, soft drinks. Daily profit? My neighbour averages five pesos (eighty cents) per day. The have-nots form the Philippine pool of cheap labour. They toil long hours, in often miserable conditions, for a pittance of a wage. I saw a labourer in a sugar mill. His face was wrinkled with care. His body was bent from carrying 50 kilo bags to trucks. He didn't weigh more than 50 kilos himself. He looked sixty years old. I asked about his age. He was not even forty.

The have-nots contribute to low production cost, competitive exports, and high profits. They have little opportunity for advancement. They speak only one of the many Philippine dialects. They have no working knowledge of English, the language of education and commerce. They are clumsy at best in their new national language Filipino.

Why poverty? A simple question for which no simple answer can be found. I will attempt to survey the why of poverty as I see and experience it in the Third World.

Why hasn't The Philippines been able to secure for itself the benefits of a well developed nation? The energy crisis has skyrocketed the outflow of dollars. Electrification projects have halted in numerous areas as the cost of oil has become prohibitive. Increased transportation cost has contributed to the rate of inflation.

Economic rivalries among major industrial nations are intensifying, creating hardships for nations without a strong political clout. The major powers struggle for political mastery in their sphere of influence. Noncommunist Asia is doubtful about U.S. military commitment since the fall of South Vietnam and the recognition of Red China, abandoning Taiwan.

The Philippines is still in the process of shaking off its colonial past. It does not feel economically free. And as long as The Philippines remains a Third World country, it will continue to find itself in a disadvantageous position in its relations with stronger nations.

Philippine society, despite the rapid growth of its cities, is still largely rural in scope. About two thirds of the population lives in rural areas. Over half of its population derives its income from the agricultural, forestry and fishing sectors which contribute approximately one third of the national output. As a result, the largest percentage of the people live by subsistence farming or by menial occupation.

The middle class is relatively small in proportion about 12 percent. But the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. As a consequence, there is an inadequacy of production and an excess of luxury imports. The rich live in palatial homes and have

expensive cars, the latest in modern appliances, works of art and holidays abroad. The current economic situation has centralized and institutionalized wealth. And nowhere in Southeast Asia are fortunes more secure than in The Philippines.

The Philippines, more than any other nation in Asia, has been blessed by natural resources. Copper, chromate, iron, ore, manganese, and mercury are important products. The mining sector is a vital source of exports. Production of fuel is still limited to low grade coal. But some small oil wells will be producing this year. This will help reduce the dollar outflow.

Why poverty in a beautiful and lush nation such as The Philippines? All Southeast Asian countries have more than 40 percent of their population below 15 years of age. The Philippines itself has one of the fastest growing populations in the world. Wherever you travel, you see crowds of young people and children. In the mid sixties, the population was 27 million: it is now 45 million. This enormous increase has grave implications in the pressure the youth will exert on the labour market. Soedjatmoko, a philosopher, who served as Indonesia's ambassador to the U.S. from 1968 to 1971, and since then involved with the development agency in Jakarta, says, "the development efforts, especially in the populous countries, have already become inadequate to prevent the growth of the poor, the illiterate, the unemployed, and those whose minds are permanently damaged as a result of infant malnutrition. It is obvious that the fundamental challenges posed by the concept of human dignity calls for a much more adequate capacity to come to grips with these problems on the national as well as international level."

Rapid population growth means more mouths to feed. This calls for extraordinary efforts in food production. The high birth rate also puts a strain on economic development. The largest single expenditure of the national budget is for education. In spite of the financial outlay, the government is unable to keep up with the expansion of facilities and quality of instruction to meet the growing demand.

The Philippines has a high literacy rate, but this doesn't mean that everyone falls in the category of "true functional literacy". Many adults do not go beyond the level of reading comic books. Even the step of entering high school is a difficult one for families of low income. Public schools are free, but the parents have to pay for pens, paper, books and uniforms.

Only 3.4 percent of the nation's total population holds an academic degree. Although the quality of higher education leaves something to be desired, it contributes to socially useful attitudes, and skills. The Filipino places great emphasis on education. It is seen as a means to end. It may give a person a chance to move from a lower to a higher class. And this is important in a class conscious society. A diploma or a degree is a highly-priced possession.

In the Philippines, agriculture provides a livelihood for about two thirds of the population, although only one fifth of the land is under cultivation. Until recently, most of the land

was owned by a few wealthy families. The government is now enforcing with some measure of success a land distribution program.

Farm income is low because of poor methods, worn out land and crop failures. On the one hand, the crop yields in the Philippines are among the lowest in the world; but on the other hand, agriculture and land development have kept abreast of population growth. Rapid development of mechanized farming may provide better crop yields, but a huge part of the population will be thrown out of work if they are replaced by machines for the sake of efficient and economic farming.

Filipino peasants, in their desire to support their families, have migrated to different parts of the Philippines in search for unoccupied land to claim and cultivate. But the peasant migration is slowing down as it is increasingly difficult, due to the population explosion, to find a plot of land that can be worked.

The weather often creates havoc. The typhoons are as destructive and numerous as ever. One of the worst typhoons last year resulted in the death of 118 people. An estimated \$50 million worth of crops was reported lost in the ravaged areas, particularly in Central Luzon. Our own area was only hit by the tail end of the typhoon.

One of the results of the worldwide population explosion is the mushrooming development of the enormous cities. Manila is a case in point. For example, our province, Negros Occidental, continues to have a rapid population increase accompanied by a lack of available work. Manila is seen here as a haven of opportunity for economic advance. This city has impressive building projects. More tax pesos are spent in Manila in proportion than anywhere else in the Philippines.

The migrant to Manila becomes a part of a new humanity. Here are men cut from contact with nature. The old structures and norms no longer provide security. They are uprooted and away from the powerful influence of the traditional extended family. Migration to the city compounds the crime and poverty problem.

Impaired health and poverty go hand in hand. The increased number unemployed or underemployed contribute to the poverty level where dietary insufficiency and poor health care are harsh realities.

There are government financed health centers where a medical team attempts to provide limited care for thousands of people in widely scattered areas and Barrios. Their task is difficult. Facilities are inadequate and medical supplies limited. In our province alone, 60 more medical doctors are required to meet the existing needs. Prevalence of dysentery, typhoid, bronchitis, tuberculosis and other diseases claim a high toll in human resources.

Pneumonia remains the number one killer disease in the Philippines and tuberculosis is second. An estimated 1.5 million Filipinos are infected with the disease with 300,000 in

its advance stage and capable of spreading infection. Losses in manpower as a result of TB have been estimated to amount to \$75 million per year.

Hospital care for the poor leaves much to be desired. I visited a charity hospital and was shocked by the dirt, and poor care given to the patients. The hospital was overcrowded. Patients were on cots in the hallways. Cats and dogs were running around. Many poor consider the charity hospital only when they are desperate for help. No wonder that "herbolarios" (herb "doctors") do brisk business. They are receptive to the poor and are comparatively effective in treating local ailments.

Proper health care is further complicated by traditional and religious practices even in more developed nations than the Philippines. What do you think of these remedies traditional Chinese in Singapore use? Elderly Chinese, suffering from tuberculosis, believe that coffin fungus can cure them of the disease. They go to the death houses, scrape the fungus of a coffin lid opposite the mouth of a corpse and make it into a thin soup.

Evil spirits, witches and ghosts are real for multitudes of Filipinos. They are believed to influence life for good or ill. Demonic entities are seen as either harmful or beneficial to people. If they turn out to be friendly, and in some cases even affectionate, one can expect favours from them; if hostile, one has a real need for a sorcerer or faith healer to escape from their clutches. Traditional beliefs and practices have a powerful grip on many Filipinos.

Should missionaries study economic conditions of the land in which they work? I am convinced that missionaries, proclaiming the whole of the Gospel to the whole of man, need to know how the masses live and earn a livelihood. How can they effectively minister if they do not know where the masses are at?

One Saturday morning, we went for a drive in the country to see some of the magnificent scenery of Negros Occidental. It took us two hours to cover a distance of 30 kilometers. The road was in some places no more than a dirt track, fit only for a caraboa cart.

The main highway in Negros is like a washboard in many places. Driving anywhere is nerve shattering, especially at night. You meet cars without taillights, broken down trucks parked right on the road.

Local provincial roads are often made of inferior materials. The roadbeds are of poor quality. Heavy tropical downpours easily damage or even destroy parts of roads. The heavy traffic in the sugar cane season also contributes to the road deterioration. Repair work is expensive.

The present network of roads is highly inadequate. A rapidly growing population in a predominantly agricultural economy needs a vast network of good rural feeder roads.

The government is funding, through loans or with foreign aid, the building of new roads; but it will take many years for an adequate network to be built.

The cost of transportation in times of economic crisis is high, especially for the poor. The latest OPEC price increase for oil places an ever greater burden on the economic depressed areas as the cost of transportation tends to spiral out of normal range.

The Philippines has a growing economy, but the benefits of growth have hardly trickled down outside Metro Manila and other comparatively well to do regions. A Filipino columnist in *Asia Week* commented that Marcos and his technocrats still have to find a way of stirring the stagnant and bone poor hinterlands.

For over a decade, forest products, particularly logs, have been among the top export commodities of the Philippines. They have brought badly needed foreign exchange earnings, but the cost has been high. Forests have been denuded. Where there is no forest cover, there is massive erosion, and flashfloods during the rainy season. Thousands of plant and animal species have become extinct. Where there were once beautiful and lush forests, there are now barren hillsides.

The government launched a much needed forest conservation and tree planting program in July, 1977, to check deforestation. It is also curbing the logging industry through legislation.

Gambling's tantalizing promise of instant riches has a near universal appeal. Its fans are not only found in Canada, but in the Philippines as well. This young nation is in the grips of a raging gambling fever. *Asia Week* reports that what used to be a penny-ante past time before martial law in 1972 has turned into a billion peso boom from Baguio in Central Luzon to Zamboanga in Southern Mindanao. The Philippines' gambling tax of 22% is the third highest in the world, behind Mauritius (50%) and India (45%). The tax is used by the government, hard pressed for cash to push its development projects. The biggest casino in Asia is located in Zamboanga, its 1,600 square meters is reported to be a "gambler's dream". Cebu has now a floating casino, and a house of chance has recently opened its doors in the famous mountain resort of Baguio. The rich often gamble for high stakes. Reliable sources informed me of men who gambled away their business enterprises.

Jose Rizal (1868 - 1896), Philippines' national hero, expressed already in his time his deep concern about the adverse influence of gambling upon Philippine society. He spoke of gambling as breeding dislike for steady and difficult work by its promise of easy money and its appeal to the emotions.

Cockfighting is a passion that is deeply rooted in the lives of the Filipinos. A common sight is a man walking around with his rooster, stroking it, comparing it with the roosters of his neighbours. Many men look after their game birds in a much better way than they do after their own children. The price of game birds range from three hundred to several thousands of pesos. Each town and barrio has a cockpit, where fortunes are lost or

won. After mass on Sunday, poor and rich men alike go to the cockpit to watch the fights. "The poor man," writes Jose Rizal, "would go to the cockpit, there to risk his all with the dream that he would, in so short a time, get rich without working. The rich man would go there to find amusement, and to have a way of spending the money left to him after the feasting and the mass offerings."

Poverty is more than an economic misfortune, a social catastrophe. Its problems are complex, and some are deeply rooted in man's rebellion against God. In the face of glaring poverty, and large scale inequity, Christians need to speak and live prophetically. Scripture says, "Whoso stoppeth his ears at the cry of the poor, he also shall cry himself, but shall not be heard." (Proverbs 21:13)

We needed bunk beds for the dormitory of our theological school. We had difficulties getting them by the time of the school opening. Why? Power brownouts! The furniture shop could only operate whenever electricity was available. Local industries have been chafing for a long time under the recurrence of power brownouts. They are counterproductive in a developing nation that is exerting efforts toward industrialization.

A regular curriculum schedule in a school is hard to maintain. The Philippines had no less than 16 special holidays during 1978. This is on top of the 11 legal holidays; plus 10 or more days of vacation for workers in government services and industries. Those extra holidays, unpredictable brownouts and other no work days have often caused havoc in the industrial sector.

I have read many pamphlets, books and articles, written in the developed, industrialized West, on how to solve the poverty problems of the Third World. I recall few articles that pointed to religious belief as a poverty factor. Some authors give the impression that if only the American multinational corporations change their ways, or even pull out of the Third World; and if only all men of good will get together, and if more foreign aid is given, a just and progressive society can be built.

These are romantic views that overlook the fact that man is not just an economic being, but a being created in the image of God. He is religious by nature. His religion colours his outlook and way of life.

## **Buddhism**

Buddhism has failed in Asia. Its teaching that peace can only come through the extinction of desire, can meet neither the needs of the heart nor the challenges of the modern age. The traditional ideal of the Buddhist is the monk who has abandoned everything, and is not concerned with social needs and justice.

## **Hinduism**

Someone has said that the only thing that all Hindus unite in is the belief that the cow is sacred and is not allowed to be killed. In Hinduism, you can find the great contrasts,

from the most abstract philosophical speculations to the crassest worship of demons, from the denial of the body to the most erotic cultic practices.

The highest Hindu Scriptures, Bhagavad Gita, declare that all efforts to change the social order and to elevate the masses are both wicked and futile. They teach that the superiority of the classes and the inferiority of the masses are rooted in the divine order.

## **Islam**

Resurgent Islam presents itself to the Western observer with the renewal of political power. But we should not think that this renewal of life in Islam countries is only politically oriented, its power fuelled by the OPEC dollar.

In Islam countries there is a serious attempt to make the Koran adaptable to the modern age. The difficulties involved are many. Violence has even erupted. Iran is a tragic example. Traditional religious leaders want to turn back the clock, and create an Islamic state with a lifestyle based on the teachings of the Koran.

In Islam, the orthodox are advancing and the "progressive", the Western oriented believers are retreating.

The Koran does not proclaim religious equality. Non Muslims in Islam nations can only hope at best for some measure of tolerance. Islam nations are not democracies, but theocracies.

## **Roman Catholicism**

In the Philippines, the Roman Catholic Church, in the Spanish colonial days, stemmed the tide of progress through censorship and inculcation of hatred towards scientific knowledge.

Jose Rizal described the Roman Catholic Church as an elaborate system perfected and tenaciously operated by those who wish to keep the Islands in holy ignorance. He also said of folk Catholicism that its doctrines teach the Filipino to irrigate his fields during the dry season, not by means of canals but with Masses and prayers; to protect his animal during an epidemic with holy water, exorcism and benedictions costing five duros.

Poverty cannot be separated from man's attitude towards the Creator. Man is still in revolt. He is a rebel by nature, prone to hate God and his neighbours. His own sinful nature leads to dehumanization and despair. The Gospel declares that God alone can transform lives. In our world, filled with man's inhumanity against his fellowman, the finished work of Christ and its relation to sin must be preached.

An evangelical theologian wrote that men are bound by an enslavement that they can never conquer; that however desirable freedom from the oppression of external circumstance is, such freedom can never take the place of that freedom from sin, which



is God's act in Christ. Jesus said, "And ye shall know the truth, and the Truth shall make you free." (John 8:32)

When one lives and works in a Third World country, the poverty problem is not academic. He sees all around him the moral and material degradation that ends in a feeling of being an outcast in society. The poor live in another world, the world of the slums, the barrios, people live in shacks on garbage dumps and next to open sewers.

The poor cannot be consigned to a back door existence, like the rich man did with Lazarus. We must look at Lazarus' sores and filthy rags, and have personal contact with him.

What is the record of missions in giving aid to the Lazarus' of our time? As far as charitable activity is concerned, missions have a magnificent record. Schools for the deaf and blind have been established. Care has been given to lepers, hospitals have been founded. Multitudes have been taught to read and write. But missions are now at the crossroads.

Missions are confronted by great non Christian ideologies and religions. A war of ideas is ceaselessly fought as never before, and without truce. The glaring inequities of our time are staring the Church in the face. Theologians are asking: On whose side does God place Himself? Catalino G. Arevalo, a Filipino Jesuit and professor of ecclesiology and theology of atonement, Loyola School of Theology, Ateneo de Manila University, claims that God is only on the side of the poor.

He says that "nothing is more clear in the sacred writings than this: that God places himself on the side of the weak, of the poor, of those without influence or power, that God comes again and again to be their protector, their advocate, their defender he who proves himself their Father." He also says that Christ identifies Himself with the powerless and deprived, and, therefore, the Church must do the same. The Church is not of all and for all, rich and poor alike. The physical poor inherit the kingdom.

Much is said about the social dimension of sin, the unjust structures, but very little about individual sins. Is God only for the poor, and does He condemn only structural sins? God is concerned for all persons. The poor sin just as do the prosperous. All men are answerable to God. All men must seek divine forgiveness. Materialism is not just the sin of the rich.

We live in apocalyptic times. The poor may not be neglected. The Lazarus' of our age knocks at the door of our conscience. Scripture demands a deep involvement for the impoverished of the world. Christians have the task of proclaiming the Kingdom in our "groaning" world, and of espousing just laws and working for social structures that are truly liberating and just. To thank God for all the material possessions, without raising an effective voice against injustice will not justify claims on our part to be prophetic.

How do we aid the poor? Foreign aid is often seen as a magic wand that is supposed to be the cure for all ills. But massive financial assistance to ensure economic growth has failed. Economic development by itself is not enough.

A document of the Government of India entitled *Towards an Approach to the Fifth Plan* (1972) states: "Economic development in the last two decades has resulted in an all round increase in per capita income. The proportion of the poor, defined as those living below a basic standard of consumption, has slightly come down. Yet the absolute number of people below the poverty line today is just as large as it was two decades ago. And these people living in abject poverty constitute between two fifths and one half of all Indian citizens." Professor C.T. Kurien of Madras Christian College in India observes, "And so the cliché has come true in our case: two decades of planned economic development has led to the rich becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer."

More foreign aid does not necessarily lead to development. Capital intensive energy consuming, labour saving devices make lavish use of resources that are expensive, foreign exchange absorbing, and scarce in the Third World, while failing to utilize the very resources people it has in abundance.

The Philippine government is now beginning to encourage the masses to develop cottage industries and improved agricultural methods. Local resources are used appropriate to the people in their own environment.

Indiscriminate giving of money is not the answer. A farmer may receive money to improve the irrigation of his land; but he may be under pressure to help out his relatives, pay back a gambling debt, or spend his money during fiesta time. The government in Negros Occidental experimented with giving pigs to farmers. The governor told us at a fundraising meeting that these pigs usually got sick and died during fiesta time. So immediate pressure of social status may take priority and money is misappropriated. The issues are basically moral and religious.

Development personnel are more and more working with the premise do not plan "for" but "with" the people.

In the Philippines, the CRWRC teaches church members to help themselves, and that Jesus Christ is the Lord of every part of their lives. Cottage industries the making of dolls and shirts have been started and are growing. Pigs have been provided. Stewardship is taught. Most church members have increased their income since they joined forces with the CRWRC. Their living conditions have improved.

As we reflect on the urgent need to come to the aid of the poor, we must not fall for the temptation to let the Church become an agency devoted to the multiplication of loaves and fishes. A new world cannot be made by human hands. The transformation of the world into a reign of peace, harmony and perfect justice will not be the work of man, but

of God. We wait for the New Age to come. "But according to His promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." (2 Peter 3:13)

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