

I Want to be a Good Catholic

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defend the poor."

There is a time to speak and a time to be silent. Tonight is the first time that I will speak publicly about the upheaval that rocked Couples for Christ.

For over a year, I chose to keep quiet out of respect for long cherished friendships and refrained from adding fuel to the fire while emotions were high. What was an internal leadership transition within an organization I felt should not have been made into a public issue and prudence should have been taken not to drag the Catholic Church into the conflict. I must admit that it was tempting at times for me to speak out and defend myself but I listened to the voice within my heart that kept telling me "keep still, I will defend those who

Now I understand how God shielded me by making me computer illiterate. The fight for control over CFC was being waged in the internet, while the struggle to ease human suffering was happening in the GK communities. During the most difficult moments, I went to the poor for consolation. It became clear to me that the poor are oftentimes the victim when there is conflict among leaders. When politicians fight, it is the poor who suffer. Ironically, when religious leaders fight it is also the poor who suffer, just like the CFC controversy where Gawad Kalinga became the central issue. My stand on this is clear; I will always be on the side of the poor. As a Christian, I believe that this is also the stand of Jesus. I have remained with CFC that is building the church of the poor.



As I turn the page to start a new chapter in my life, I want to make one thing clear. Contrary to allegations, I have not veered away from the Catholic Church and set aside my faith for social work. I have put my social work inside my faith.

In God's perfect plan he gave me the gift of being Filipino by virtue of birth and the privilege of being Catholic by baptism and choice. Both are absolute realities that I treasure. Being Filipino for me is a way of life that must be lived with honor. Being Catholic is a covenant of love that must be practiced, not just preached.

It is my personal conviction that I am not a good Catholic if I do not love my country or if I allow my countrymen to remain poor even if I live a devout and decent life. Within our context, where 85% of our

population profess to be Catholic, faith and patriotism must go together to address the twin sisters of underdevelopment- poverty and corruption.

Bishop Francisco Claver, SJ., comments on the reluctance before of the Church to address this issue in his new book *The Making of a Local Church*. "Economics, so the charge went, is outside of the Church's competence. Not so much now. It is readily seen that if, faithful to Christ's concern for the least of his brothers and sisters, we must feed the hungry, teach the ignorant, heal the sick, we can and must do something about the causes, not just the symptoms, of their hunger, their ignorance, their sicknesses." When addressing corruption, which is a moral issue, the Church is also being accused by the powerful and those with vested interests "of meddling in politics."

Ordinary Catholics like myself can and must do something about politics and economics in the interest of the poor in order to build a nation.

Central to my being Catholic is Jesus' love for the poor. He saw the world through their eyes. His world-view was from the bottom up. His value system was always skewed in their favor- the last shall be first, the lowest shall be raised to the highest. The challenge for me is to care for them in a manner that will help them rise to their highest potential. My piety and pity alone will not save them; the squatters need land, not alms... justice, not dole-out. Without land, they cannot build homes or produce food. Without decent homes, they have no dreams. Without dreams, they have no desire to study or work. It is terribly unchristian for Filipinos to be squatters in a country where there is so much land in the possession of a few.

When a country like Vietnam, deemed godless by us, is able to reduce poverty from 60% to 15% in 20 years and produce surplus rice with technology coming from the Philippines and export to us, what message are we giving to the world? That we love the poor so much that we want them to remain poor and to produce more of their own kind? True love for the poor is redemptive and transformative, not condescending or patronizing or accepting that poverty is their destiny.

One interesting issue raised about me was that I was talking too much about nation-building when I should be preaching about Kingdom-building. For me, there is no dualism: nation-building is Kingdom-building. We need to make every Filipino passionate nation builders. Our country needs more builders, not just more preachers. The Jesus of history that I know, before he became the transcendent Christ to us, was a carpenter and the builder of both a physical and a spiritual kingdom. His disciples followed his example and built the early Christian communities where believers shared their resources with one another and no one was in need. This was the inspiration to start the first Gawad Kalinga village in Bagong Silang, Caloocan City. Building sustainable GK communities is about values as well as economics. It is also about politics. It is our antidote to corruption by promoting servant leadership. Our slogan for leaders is "Una sa serbisyo, huli sa benepisyo" (First to serve, last to benefit).



Tonight we are joined by former gang members of Bagong Silang who have graduated from college including one of them who is now a nursing professor at the Far Eastern University. Together with them are other former out of school youth and delinquents from other GK sites who are representing their local parishes at the World Youth Day celebration in Sydney, Australia. They have shown to us what they can be if we do not give up on them. True Christianity is giving power to the powerless. It is about restoring human dignity and liberating God's people from begging and stealing.



Steve Chang of Trendmicro
Source: Getty Images/Daylife.com

Since our independence from America, we have become more mendicant and mercenary as a people while our biggest Asian neighbor, China, is hitting 11% growth and on its way to improving their quality of human life and reducing corruption. This is another case of a godless society practicing the values that we preach as Christians; seeking the collective good and protecting the interest of the many from the exploitation of the few. I do not approve of some of their means to attain their end- imposing abortion to achieve their one-child policy and curtailing human rights in particular- but I do admire their success in curbing human greed which is our greatest failure in our version of Christianity and democracy.

What happened to us?

At the heart of Christianity is social justice anchored on Jesus' love for the oppressed and the spirit of democracy is equality for all but looking at the vast social inequity in wealth and opportunity in our country clearly shows that we have been unfaithful to our core values and belief systems.



GK San Nicolas Chapel
Image Source: <http://fernandomendoza.blogspot.com/>

God is not about structures and rituals but about caring. Nation is not about politics but patriotism. Politics is competition for power; patriotism is giving up our lust for power, sharing our wealth and making heroic sacrifices for the weak to build our collective strength as a people.

Another concern raised about our spirituality for nation-building is our emphasis on heroism when the focus should be on holiness. I do not see how you can separate one from the other. To be holy in the Philippines is to be a hero for the poor. Given the influence of religion on us, we need a faith-based model as a blue-print for

sustainable development. We find the feeding of 5000 people with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fishes as the gospel's version of the Bayanihan spirit, the Sermon on the Mount as the best template in building a just and caring society, and Jesus' passion on the cross as the ultimate act of self-giving and the best model for heroism to build a nation. In Gawad Kalinga, we call this brand of heroism padugo or bleeding for the cause - the passion to serve others out of love... without counting the cost and beyond self-interest.

A nation is built with sacrifice, not money. It is natural for us to sacrifice for people we care about; sadly, the poor who need it the most are not among them. What we need is a fundamental change in mind-set: the poor are our friends. They include the squatters on our land, the laborers in our farms, the helpers in our homes. It

is only when we consider them as friends that we will gain divine favor and delivery from material and spiritual poverty as a nation.

"I no longer call you slaves but friends." This short line in scripture says it all: social justice is the path of faith and the way to peace.

Friendship is about being available to the people we care about. Poverty to me, complex as it is to others, is a simple case of absence and rejection. We have forgotten that Jesus' entire public ministry was a spirituality of presence; the son of God becoming flesh and blood, entering human history to leave behind a physical presence for all eternity. He left a trail of friends and witnesses to all His marvelous deeds, and many concrete examples for us to follow. In our lifetime we need to leave a trail of witnesses among the poor who will honestly testify- "he was our friend"- about us.

While Jesus preferred the company of the poor, he also dined with sinners; he was present to the innocent and the immoral alike...clearly, he came to save not to judge. Christianity, by his example, is a gospel of engagement, not judgment. It is a spirituality of acceptance, not rejection. His compassion towards the repentant tax collector liberated the heart of the corrupt public official from greed and released his money to the needy. Love, not condemnation, softens the heart, opens the pocket, spreads abundance, restores trust, and builds peace.



Pope Benedict and U.S. President Bush
Image Source: [Reuters](#)

Pope Benedict showed us authentic Christian witnessing on his recent trip to the United States. He came to the biggest producer and distributor of contraceptives in the world not to condemn but to love. And America loved him back. He did not arrive in glory as the supreme leader of the most powerful church in the world but in humility to ask forgiveness for the sex abuses of the clergy. This simple act of humility

had greater impact on me than all the sermons that I have heard in recent times. Despite the embarrassing nature of his visit, I've never been prouder to be Catholic.

My prayer today is for the Holy Father to come to the Philippines to ask forgiveness for our failure in social justice and for our hypocrisy in covering up or justifying our unfaithfulness. This for me is the symbolic act of humility needed to redeem a sinful nation and usher in a new season of grace.

Yes, we need to repent and reform rather than blame anyone for our collective sin against the nation. Our citizens are no longer fooled by scapegoats and excuses. Now that there is greater connectivity, they know what is happening and they are starting to demand accountability. The moment has come for us to stop pointing an accusing finger on anyone since we are all compromised. We need to change now... and do what is right.

Let me set this straight before I am taken out of context. There is nothing wrong with the social teachings of the church; there is only our failure to practice them, clergy and laity alike. I cannot speak for the clergy; they have their own accountability to their vows as I have mine to my oaths as a citizen and as a believer. Admittedly, I feel trivialized and embarrassed when people joke about the clergy. While the public demands the highest level of morality and witnessing from our moral icons, the most that I can say oftentimes to defend their lifestyle or to explain their indiscretion is that "they are also human." I know that it is hard for them as it is for me.

It was this cognizance of being human myself that made me join Couples for Christ in 1985. I needed a support environment to keep my vows as a husband and as a father in a world of philanderers and scoundrels.

I must admit that growing up male in a Third-world setting is definitely a challenge to the gender with the bigger ego and the more aggressive hormone. Ego without a mature conscience is power without honor; testosterone in a body without character is like keeping a fox inside a chicken coop. Without conscience and character, we are a danger to ourselves and to the world around us. The trusting innocent are particularly vulnerable to those in robes and other religious leaders.

Without exaggeration, the male in our society are weak because we have not been properly raised to be stewards. Many homes do not have fathers and our communities lack heroes. To compensate, women are forced to take on these roles even at the risk of abuse from emasculated partners.

In retrospect, Couples for Christ helped me grow a conscience and develop character without which I would have no credibility as head of my domestic church. It was a decision to find strength through discipleship and surrender of my ego to a greater power in the company of other fallen men. It is a lifetime process learning to detach from my wants and to be passionate about His will.

The demands of discipleship helped me discover the essence of real manhood: honor. In a country of cheaters, honesty is of the highest value. In the land of the corrupt, a man of integrity is king. To a follower of Christ like myself... weak and imperfect as I am... truth is the way to real power and freedom. The reward of taking this difficult path of honor for me is priceless- the affection of my wife and the respect of my children after 30 years of marriage and family life.

Building the church of the home however was just the first phase of the journey for me. For others, perhaps it is enough. Family renewal in my mind is not an end but foundational to the bigger mission- societal renewal and nation building. As development of conscience and character are vital to effective family governance, they are also cornerstones for good citizenship. Nation-building is about character-building.



Oftentimes we are not conscious that the higher collective good is sacrificed for self and kin. Family is the common and most acceptable excuse for greed in a society that prides and thrives on strong familial ties. Family demands the highest value because it is an extension of the self. The poor is not seen from the perspective of a relationship, either as family or friend, but as an object of charity or as a servant. So we give them alms and orders- not respect or affection that are only bestowed on those we love or people we consider important. Dona Victorina¹ was outwardly religious, pious, and devout but she was also a *matapobre*³ according to Dr. Jose Rizal.

This is the heart of our problem as a Christian nation. We have not invested enough in building the church of the poor. We missed Jesus' point of view and wisdom when he spoke about leaving family as a condition for discipleship. The poor not only deserve our attention but investing in them will catalyze economic activities, create opportunities, and build a safer environment for our children. Our greatest asset, our biggest market- the poor – are just waiting to be mentored, empowered, and harnessed as our engine for growth. The stones

that were rejected will become the cornerstone for nation-building.

Knowing this, how do we face the future as Catholics in a country of immense potential but mired in poverty of spirit and body?

My personal response is simple: Gawad Kalinga- the Filipino expression of integral evangelization that seeks to build good citizenship on earth as it is in heaven. Being Catholic is my choice that demands conviction and action from me.

This is my anchor: faith in God, love for family, and pride in being Filipino.

This is my compass: Christ as the core of my conscience, my model of citizenship, and the source of commonsense. He is my navigator through controversy and conflict, the mirror to my soul, my companion and consolation.

I go to Church for mass and communion every Sunday but I strive daily to be in communion with the masses and those who want to see their lives improve. To many, going to church is an end. For me, being Catholic begins the moment I step out of the church. I am called to be a man for others.

To build solidarity, I am guided by Pope Benedict's spirit of ecumenism in this country divided by religious intolerance and partisan politics. For me, Catholic fundamentalism is just as bad as fundamentalism that we deplore in other religion. Hypocrisy and bigotry in any language and form are unacceptable to me as a Catholic as they were to Jesus.



Image Source: <http://www.wya.net/>

With all our imperfections, I am proud to be Catholic and I want to bring passion in the Church to serve God by serving the poor.

There are rumors that I am doing all of these because I will run for public office. To set the record straight, this is not my desire or calling. I value the freedom to serve more than the authority to rule. To gain freedom, I will not seek political power or personal profit from business. Real power is in not wanting it. True wealth is in not loving money but sharing it with those deprived of a dignified life due to lack of it. To be free is not to put a price tag to one's soul.

To end, let me share with you my wish before I die. I want to see the Philippines as the first Catholic nation in Asia that will rise from third-world poverty and corruption. I will not rest until we put Fr. Damaso and Dona Victorina finally to rest.

¹ <http://www.viloria.com/elfilibusterismo/01.html>

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Father_D%C3%A1maso

³ <http://iskandalo.com/article.html?id=242>