YOUTH AS AGENTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE
Quote in the Act

“As far as my subspecialty is concerned, she is fit to be treated as an outpatient.”

Mario Ver, Orthopedic surgeon at St. Luke Medical Center; at a court hearing of the case of former Philippine president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo who asked for an allow-departure order in order to seek treatment abroad, but was denied by the Department of Justice that saw instead an alibi of Arroyo to escape from impending court cases.

“We can’t be considered the weak link of Europe.”

Mario Monti, the newly sworn-in Prime Minister of Italy; amid high expectations that Italy, which is the eurozone’s third largest economy but gripped in a debt crisis, could now repair itself and save the euro from disaster.

“We were washed out.”

Shady el Ghazaly Harb, one of the youth activists that set off the revolution in Egypt; over early election results dominated by the Islamist party that was formed by the Muslim Brotherhood, in Egypt’s first Parliament since the ouster of Hosni Mubarak.

“My child, we have won.”

Virginia Paligutan, an 80-year old Hacienda Luisita worker; on the recent Supreme Court decision to distribute the land of Hacienda Luisita in Tarlac to farmers after several decades of peasant battle with the hacienda owners, the family of Philippine President Benigno Aquino III.

“I was ordered to burn the tapes.”

Pedro Sumayo, an officer of the Intelligence Service of the Armed Forces of the Philippines during the May 2004 national elections; at the recent joint hearing of the Senate blue ribbon and electoral committees when asked what he did with the tapes that recorded the conversation allegedly by then President Arroyo and an election official.

“Throughout the Horn of Africa, 13.3 million people go to bed hungry. There have been more than 30,000 children under the age of five that have died already in Somalia.”

Rajiv Shal, head of the United States Agency for International Development; citing the Islamic militant group Shabab as the primary cause of hunger for restricting the activities of international aid groups who are seeking unimpeded access to the people in need of food.
There is no mistaking that the Filipino people had been wronged by its political leaders. The country has been violated, pillaged and plundered so that while in the 60’s the Philippines was close to Japan in financial and social stature, today it is seemingly in the league with the poorest Afghanistan, in Southeast Asia.

The 15 years or so of Martial Law was a wholesale rubout. In the guise of saving the country from anarchy and instead establishing what Ferdinand Marcos called “new society,” the citizenry woke up to a dictatorship that has dragged the country to bankruptcy and unimaginable count of human rights violations, disappearances and salvaging.

The political reign of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was 9 years—or 6 years short of the term of Marcos’ tyrannical rule. She was, of course, no tyrant or dictator, but she is currently flooded with accusations of electoral sabotage, plunder and multi-layered graft and corruption. She shares with Marcos the distinction of being the most despised president of this country. While the Supreme Court and the Department of Justice are in hated debates sorting out the complications of legal technicalities from political concessions, shame from political loyalties or patronage, the people know anyway that they have been wronged, cheated and plundered.

Presumably, this is what makes people’s hearts bleed: opportunities for a better life that has slipped needlessly away due to a breed of leadership that is bereft of the principles of the common good which grossly turns a political position into a milking cow or a highly profitable venture. In this country, a political race is a race to building a financial empire—or, at least, in recent memory, also a race, consequentially, to the prison cell. But in a country where impunity has become cultural, or so it seems, to see a big fish somehow caught up with the long arm of the law is consoling indeed—irrespective of whether it be in a house, in a hospital, in a dingy detention cell or, as in the case of Erap, in a family resort.

With just a little over a hundred years of existence, the Philippine republic is relatively young—and so is the political mores of its leaders and citizenry. Understandably, other countries also had their share of political immaturity and its devastating consequences. But in a time where all technology for building a mature citizenry, such as the media and a wide-range of communication techniques, are at hand it should not take another century to reach political maturity and civility.

Of late, the Church which is mostly the laity has been calling for social transformation by, among others, evangelizing Philippine politics. In no time, this should make a difference, hopefully.

This issue opens with Atty. Jo Aurea Imbong’s “Christian Citizenship in the Philippines Today”. This was originally a talk delivered at the 17th Biennial National Convention of the Council of the Laity in the Philippines held in Manila on October 23, 2000. Fr. Roy Cimagala, pens our cover story “Youth as agents of social change.” This issue is dedicated to the Filipino youth in celebration of CBCP’s Year of the Youth. Read on.
Christian Citizenship in the Philippines Today

By Atty. Jo Aurea Imbong

The last decade and well into the present year will be remembered as a time when religious freedom and its exercise took severe challenge in the public square.

From the Middle East to the Indian subcontinent, from parts of sub-Saharan Africa to regions of East Asia, millions of Christians are under threat, and thousands have paid with their very lives for their refusal to part company with the faith. We can well say, Philippines included, that the times are ripe for a whole new generation of martyrs.

Right in our midst, we hear strident cries asserting that “religion has no place in the public square.”

At a public hearing of the Reproductive Health bill in Congress last year, a young man who calls himself a Free Thinker insisted that the Church has no place in the debate. Another, a respectable-looking lady, a confessed agnostic, asked to be respected in her nonbelief, and accused the Catholic Church of imposing its doctrine in the public fora.

The drive to marginalize religion runs along deeper and more subtle undercurrents. It starts in the same human heart that has the makings of the zeal and passion of a contemplative. This time, however, that same heart vibrates with a searing malevolence against anything religious and transcendental. It nurtures a disdain that says—“We are responsible for nothing outside ourselves, for we are the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever.”

This is the counter-culture that is making its way into the corridors of legislation in matters of human life itself, of family, of traditional values. Marriage of man and woman, the rock of society, is now in the firing line. Listen to the catchwords; “Gender identity is an individual’s sense of being, either male or female, man or woman, or something other, or in between.” It seems... that the single biggest enemy to homosexuality is Christianity . . .”

That kind of speech goes beyond the gender culture. Today it oversteps all bounds of reason and now, through legislation, threatens to dismantle and uproot the basic girders and foundations of society, promising to “keep [its] eyes on the goals of providing true alternatives to marriage and of radically reordering society’s view of the family.”

A Senate Bill discussed last week purportedly against social discrimination proposes the repeal within three years of all existing laws that discriminate against gender orientations on marriage. That would mean the automatic extinction of man-woman marriage in the Family Code, among others. The day will come, sooner than we think, when we would have to celebrate the union of Adam and Steve.

To those who would be a hindrance to this agenda, the message is consistent: “Keep your God out of the debate.”

Pope Benedict XVI describes this cultural lashing quite graphically. Out there, he said, it is a “foul, chaotic, enslaved, and enslaving world.” The moment you walk out of this holy ground, it will seem that you are thrust into air that suffocates, where you have a malevolent “reproductive health” agenda that continues to make demands on the time and resources of Congress for the last twelve years, dividing the nation with flaming passions unheard of; where Christianity is flogged right in the middle of its sacred rituals; where Princes of the Church are pierced with the darts of malice, and for the first time in this country, The Christ is made fodder for comic relief;

Whatever it is that is ravaging our culture must be confronted and hemmed in, not by violent words, but by the language of our Faith spoken by each member of the Body of Christ in the public square.

Remember, we are citizens of two...
domains: citizens of Heaven, and of the world. Our citizenship brings with it three commissionings:

1st. As Christian citizens, we have the right and the duty to weigh the justice and fairness of proposed legislation, with due regard to the truth about the nature of man and the demands of the common good;

2nd. As Christian citizens we have the duty to strive to do our civic duty in light of the teachings of our faith, in one vital synthesis with religion;

3rd. As Christian laity, we are charged to banner that faith in the public square by speaking of what our religion bids us to do.

The third is what I mean to tackle for it makes each one of us responsible, answerable, and accountable. We owe it to ourselves and to the Body of Christ.

There are many ways to silence the laity. But we are empowered because Light was never meant to be hidden. The Pearl of Great Price was not meant to be concealed. The Word was never meant to be suppressed.

Let us then consider a few legal parameters.

1. Religious speech expressed by the faithful does not violate the doctrine of Separation of Church and State, nor the Non-establishment Clause.

   In order for religious expression to pose a constitutional problem, the religious speech or expression must come from the mouth of the state. For there is a crucial difference between the government speaking and endorsing religion—which is forbidden—and private speech endorsing a religion, which the Free Speech and Religious Freedom clauses protect.

   When the laity speak the language of the Faith in any public discourse on raging issues, it is because as written by the eminent Statesman and Jurist, William Blackstone: “[God’s law, the law of nature] is binding all over the globe, in all countries, and at all times. No human laws are of any validity if contrary to this; and such of them as are valid derive all their force and all their authority, mediate or immediately from this original.”

   Issues of the sacredness of human life and other questions of basic morality are matters of natural moral law, not simply of Church teaching.

2. The non-establishment clause is not violated when law reflects religious teachings and values.

   Every human good acknowledged in the Constitution stems from moral teachings. Morality being rooted on religion, people of the faith have the right—and the duty—to invoke the Word, the Truth, and the Gospel in confronting the issues of the day. Separation of Church and State does not mean separation of God and State.

3. The state may NOT exclude religion from public life and public discourse. The Constitution forecloses any such attempts against the Catholic faith: “No law shall be made respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. The free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship, without discrimination or preference, shall forever be allowed. No religious text shall be required for the exercise of civil or political rights.”

   In our legal system, the Constitution vibrates with the moral law that finds its roots in religion. Right at the start, the Preamble expressly acknowledges the place of the Eternal Law in human affairs: “We, the sovereign Filipino people, imploring the aid of Almighty God, in order to build a just and humane society, and establish a Government that shall embody our ideals and aspirations, promote the common good, conserve and develop our patrimony, and secure to ourselves and our posterity, the blessings of independence and democracy under the rule of law and a regime of truth, justice, freedom, love, equality, and peace, do ordain and promulgate this Constitution.”

   Faithful to this spirit and intent, the rest of the Constitution acknowledges the inherent and inalienable rights of every person, rights that are universal to all mankind.

   In the United States, one Michael Newdow, a noted atheist, filed several lawsuits to delete the words, ‘under God’ from the American Pledge of Allegiance. Ignoring American historical context, he argued that exposing his daughter to the words would be unconstitutional. But the U.S. Court said: “The use of ‘under God’ in the Pledge of Allegiance is a statement of political philosophy, not religion. It states that our political liberties come from God and not the government, as the Declaration of Independence says.”

   In our legal system, the Preamble of the Constitution is a source of light. It sets down the origin, scope, and purpose of the Constitution.

   Does the Church unlawfully intrude into State matters when it speaks in the
public square?  
NO. Political speech derived from religious belief does not transform it into religious speech simply because of the religious belief of its advocates, or if that coincides with the tenets of some religion.

As it is, many laws overwhelmingly accepted by people are laws that religious groups agree with: laws against robbery, torture, murder, abortion, capital punishment, plunder, same-sex “marriage”, the list goes on. Punished by law, these are acts condemned as well by the Christian faith.

The State encourages honesty and integrity in public office, social justice, rights of labor. The Church condemns corporate greed, corruption, exploitation of workers. In its place, the Church teaches detachment, generosity, gift of self. The State calls them principles. The Church calls them virtue.

This is what was meant by St. Thomas More, declared by Pope Benedict XVI as the Patron Saint of politicians, that “man cannot be separated from God, nor politics from morality.”

Because of this, the Church and its faithful have the right, and will continue to exercise that right—to preach the compendium of truth without hindrance, to espouse social responsibility unimpeded, to express moral judgments even on matters touching upon the political order when the latter impinges on public morals, human dignity, and the common good. It then follows that it is a duty that devolves on each one of us who are in the middle of the world.

Of Catholics in Politics

In the realm of political exercise, this duty assumes a crucial dimension. The Second Plenary Council stands on record urging the lay faithful to participate actively and lead in the renewing of politics in accordance with values of the Good News of Jesus, to help form the civic conscience of the voting population and work to explicitly promote the election of leaders of true integrity to public office.  

While the Church has no political mission, it definitely has a political responsibility. Why is this? In fulfilling their respective missions, the paths of the Church and the State converge. They both govern human beings, and both are entrusted with the common good. And if the task of Politics is understood in its broadest sense to mean “service for the common good,” then, with more reason the Church should reverberate in the public realm.

A culture inspired by a Christian concept of the human person and his freedoms will affirm certain works of politics as compatible with the dignity of the human person, and reject others for their incompatibility with that dignity.”  

Evangelize. Or fossilize.

“For lack of wood, the fire dies out.” (Prov. 27:20)
If we do not speak out, Christ’s cause will fizzle out. That is why we should, each one of us, evangelize, or —pardon the expression—be fossilized. It is either that we engage the culture or accept the possibility that one fine day, we will go the way of many a Christian country that has changed its laws on abortion. We have seen recently how a country like Malta has taken the vote for divorce after a fierce struggle against its inroads.

Finally, in doing our duty, let us remember to put on the breast plate of faith. “For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh.” (2 Corinthians 10:3)  

(Atty. Jo Aurea Imbong is the Executive Secretary of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines’ Legal Office and Convenor of St. Thomas More Society Law Center. This piece was delivered at the 2nd National Congress of the Laity held at the Pope Pius XII Catholic Center in Manila, October 21, 2011.)

5 Amendment to SB No. 2814, “An Act prohibiting discrimination, profiling, violence and all forms of intolerance against persons based on ethnicity, race, religion or belief, sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, language, disability or other status”, 15th Congress.
6 Article III, Bill of Rights, Section 5, Constitution.
7 Faith Center Church Evangelical Ministries v. Glover, 480 F. 3d 891 (2007), Karlton, J., concurring.
9 Harris v. McRae, 448 U.S. 297.
11 PCP-II, 350
12 Ibid., Art. 8, #1.
Imagine old age without the state

By Oskari Juurikkala

Social security systems around the developed world are faced with a looming financing crisis. Unfunded pay-as-you-go (PAYGO) schemes are heading towards bankruptcy due to rising longevity, low fertility, and declining labor force participation rates.

Much of this is not accidental. Compulsory PAYGO schemes tend to discourage work in older ages and penalize larger families. Thus they contribute to their own bankruptcy.

False premises

The question is what to do about the situation. In Europe (where things are more serious), some countries are doing nothing, while others are raising minimum retirement ages and contribution rates. This will keep the systems running in the short term, but it fails to strike at the heart of the problem. In the long term, such measures discourage work even more, and they will make diligent workers slaves of a failing system.

A better solution is to get the state out of old-age security. The trouble is that many people cannot imagine old-age security without the state. This is particularly the case in continental Europe, where few people have private pension plans. To their minds, abolishing existing social security schemes implies millions of people starving to death or freezing out in the cold.

In communist countries, many people believed that capitalist economies were lacking even the basic necessities, whereas their benevolent governments were looking after them. But of course there can be food, houses, cars, and even music and literature without the state. There will be all of these in much greater abundance, when people are left free to pursue their own ends and satisfy their needs through individual responsibility, joint effort in local communities, and mutually beneficial exchanges in the marketplace. The same holds true for old-age security.

A combination of income sources

Still, many of those who basically accept free-market principles believe that the government should intervene in some areas, and that old-age security is one of them. Retirement, they think, is a far-off event, and therefore cannot be entrusted to markets. Besides, some people are not clever enough to save for their retirement, so the government must support them.

There is truth to these claims. However, the conclusions do not follow. In fact, precisely because old-age security is a challenging long-term issue, it should not be entrusted to politicians who are more concerned about satisfying the short-term needs of this or that special interest group.

Moreover, old-age security in a free society would not be a thing of the market alone. Most people would rely on a combination of sources: family, markets, mutual aid, charity, and work.

1. Family support

Governments did not invent pay-as-you-go social security. They copied it from the oldest social institution in the world — the family. Before the establishment of the modern welfare state, extended families functioned as a source of informal social insurance. Security in old age was provided on the basis of reciprocal generosity: parents procreated children, supported them and educated them. In return, children supported their elderly parents with money, housing, and care. This continues to be the basic pattern all around the developing world.

Before people were forced to finance the retirement of the rest of the society, they had many more children. Not just for the fun of it, but also because having children was economically sound. This is why people in less developed countries (LDCs) have larger families today. As Julian Simon once put it, those “who believe the poor do not weigh the consequences of having more children are simply arrogant, or ignorant, or both.”

This was well known in 19th-century Europe. When Bismarck established the first social security system in the world, he did so for this very end: to replace the family. Whatever his reasons for such a brave move, he succeeded exceedingly well. Before Bismarck, Germany had one of the highest fertility rates in all of Europe. Today, its total fertility rate is below 1.4. This will reduce the mighty European nation to half of its present size in about 50 years — unless, of course, they decide to replace German kids with Arabs and North Africans.

Now, some people argue that governmental social security is more efficient than the family. For one thing, family support is more prone to localized risks. This much is correct. However, these risks can be alleviated by risk pooling — hence the norm in traditional societies is the extended family.

Besides, there are other reasons why public programs are actually less efficient than the family. They give rise to a range of free-riding and moral-hazard behaviours such as over-early retirement, faked disability, and having too few or no children. The extended family avoids these problems, because its members deal with each other regularly, know each other well, and have better incentives to act for the common good.

2. Financial markets

Not everyone can have a family, or indeed wishes to have one. These individuals can provide for themselves through the market. Modern financial markets provide a range of pension and savings
plans. Even those who invested in a large family would probably save through the market as well.

There are some common worries regarding the market for savings and insurance. One is that people do not know how to invest, so they can be exploited by rogue dealers. Another is that markets cannot be trusted as funds may go bankrupt. A third kind of worry is that people are too foolish to save enough for retirement.

A major problem here is that we don't actually have free financial markets. I am not just referring to the wasteful and anti-competitive over-regulation that is taking place. Saving and investing privately would be far easier and simpler if the government didn't meddle with the monetary system.

First, governments pump more money into the economy, inflating the currency and making it more difficult for individuals to save. In many LDCs, it would be insane to keep your savings in paper money which loses its value at double-digit rates each year. In Mugabe's Zimbabwe, the current situation is a real nightmare: annual price inflation has gone past 1000%. In LDCs there are few places to safely invest your wealth. But even in the United States and Europe, with allegedly "controlled inflation," one needs actively to look for safer havens.

And safe havens are few and far between because of the secondary consequences of central-bank-led credit expansion. The central bank's manipulation of interest rates gives rise to artificial business cycles, which make markets highly unstable. In this system, private individuals have every reason to be wary of financial markets, banks, and insurance companies. The overall result of government interference in monetary affairs is that people are increasingly dependent on their governments to look after them in times of need.

It's better nevertheless

Despite the defects of the current system, financial markets work better than many believe. Firstly, competition is the best guarantee of good service and safe products. Yes, there can always be some hit-and-run companies trying to make short-term profits, but most people tend to rely on the more established operators with a longer-term track record — especially if one's old-age security depends on it.

In the absence of state-provided old-age security, people would also develop investment skills. Presently, the public education system is leaving people so financially illiterate (if not literally illiterate) that one wonders how they can cope in the modern world. In the absence of governmental old-age provision, families and private individuals would have better incentives to learn the tricks of the trade so that they can look after themselves. People could also bundle together and form non-profit investment clubs, which would help them to choose good products and follow the markets.

The second concern, the risk of bankruptcies, is more complicated. First, one should remember that governmental schemes are not safe either, because pension benefits depend on various economic, demographic, and political factors. With a suitable legal framework, markets can provide more security. Second, much of the worry with pension plans has been due to harmful government regulation, which in the past directed funds to imprudent and hard-to-manage defined-benefit plans instead of safer defined-contribution plans.

A third worry is that people tend to save too little. This is the common argument for compulsory savings schemes. Compulsory savings are politically more popular than a genuine free market, but not necessarily a good idea. For one thing, compulsory savings schemes imply that the government is looking after the whole show, which tends to justify harmful over-regulation.

Moreover, there is a problematic assumption here, which is that everyone needs to save for their entire retirement. This is an inherently anti-family assumption. It forgets that children should be an economically valuable investment (although also more than that), just as they were in the past.

Indeed, it is often claimed by academicians that, in countries without extensive government social security, people do not have enough retirement income. But the calculations on what is enough are inaccurate because they exclude factors one cannot measure—for example, the support that a mother of large family receives from her children is not captured in any statistics. But that is the most natural and common type of old-age security.

3. 4. Mutual aid and charities

In addition to families and markets, there is a mid-way solution, called mutual aid or fraternal societies. Before the advent of governmental welfare programs, mutual aid societies provided practically every kind of welfare service imaginable, including orphanages, hospitals, job exchanges, homes for the elderly, and scholarship programs. They also supplied health insurance at much lower rates than the present-day formal schemes. The reason they could do so is that members knew each other and supported each other, so there was less opportunity (and less desire) for moral hazard and free riding.

In a free society, mutual aid societies would possess several advantages as providers of old-age security. They are run by people who know each other, and there is a sense of community that avoids the inflex-
cated financial markets so as to pool their risks better. They could also operate private investment clubs.

In addition, there would be charities. These would target the needs of the poorest members of the society, those who have no one else to look after them. In the absence of governmental social security programs, this would probably be just a small group, because the vast majority would be looked after by a combination of family, savings, and fraternal societies. Charity could also help those whose alternative support is inadequate.

The most common concern regarding charity is that is it based too much on emotions; thus it can be variable, and donors may be too slow to react to unobserved needs. But in fact, the opposite is actually true: charities are more dynamic and adaptable than government welfare agencies. Moreover, there are various charities — the International Red Cross is an easy example — that operate on a very long-term basis and have an extensive supporter network.

Charities are also better operated than public welfare programs. They achieve more with fewer resources, and they treat their clients with more humanity and dignity. They are also more concerned about the overall well-being of those in need. Unlike government welfare, private charities and mutual aid societies do not penalize effort and thrift, but encourage initiative and responsibility. Many also help their clients to find work, learn useful skills, and acquire personal virtues. The great advantage of charities is that they are commonly run by people who believe in something greater than the state.

A practical challenge is that even generous people do not always know how to help, and they are reluctant to give money to organizations they do not know well. This can be alleviated by portals and webtools such as the Samaritan Guide, set up by the Acton Institute’s Center for Effective Compassion.

5. Work

Last but not least, people can work in old age. This is not to say they must do so, but they should be free to continue working without being penalized by the disincentives embedded in the social security system.2

In fact, the very concept of "retirement" is an invention of the state. Before social security systems were established, the vast majority of people continued working past 65. Today it would be even easier to work longer, because health care is better and most jobs require no physical exertion.

In the absence of governmental old-age security, most people would probably work longer, either full time or part time. This would be economically more sound than early once-and-for-all retirement. Working longer would be an additional source of security for those who otherwise might be short of means in old age. Part-time work also provides better health on average; full retirement causes physical and mental health deterioration.3

According to survey results, many people would prefer to continue working anyway, even if they are financially secure.4 Their work is an integral part of their life and an important source of companionship and meaning. The trouble is that it can be difficult for older workers to keep their jobs, particularly in European countries, where labour markets are over-regulated and age-based discrimination is prohibited. Therefore a sound policy of old-age security must be accompanied by the liberalization of the labour market.

The economic and moral benefits of freedom

Old-age security is not merely possible without the state. It would be far better that way. It would be more secure than public social security, which is based on empty promises by politicians. Existing governmental schemes are rapidly heading towards insolvency after only 50–70 years of operation. Anon-governmental arrangement would be more secure, because people would rely on a combination of income sources, so that the system would be more robust, flexible, and dynamic. It would also cater to different individual circumstances and preferences, and it would provide better incentives to work, save, and have children.

The benefits of a system of old-age security without the state would be more than economic. It would also foster the acquisition of personal virtues and responsibility, which would then be reflected in other spheres of private and social life. A non-governmental system would even treat the least fortunate members of the society with more humanity and dignity, and there would be fewer such people overall.

Old-age security is far too important to be left in the hands of the state.1

(Oskari Juurikkala is a researcher at the Institute of International Economic Law and a member of the Centre of Excellence in Foundations of European Law and Policy at the University of Helsinki, Finland. He is the author of Pensions, Population, and Prosperity (Acton Institute, 2007) and co-editor of Pension Provision: Government Failure Around the World (Institute of Economic Affairs, 2008).

Notes:
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Climate change and Philippine deforestation

By Fr. Shay Cullen

The greatest hope we have for saving our planet from catastrophe is the commitment of those dedicated environmentalists and scientists who love creation and work tirelessly to protect it from the irresponsible tycoons of industry and corrupt politicians who cause global warming. Many choose to deny the scientific evidence that climate change is underway and damaging our world. They only have to ask the people of Bangkok why they are experiencing the worst floods in living memory. Millions of people around the world are suffering severe deprivation, disease and death because of the extremes of climate change caused by prolonged droughts, intense storms, cyclones, and raging hurricanes.

There is one vital number, 390, that is going to determine the future of every living creature on our planet. Like it or not, believe it or not, the concentration of CO2 in our atmosphere is increasing daily. It is now at that dangerous level of 390 parts per million CO2 (ppm). This heavy concentration is too much already and the planet is reaching a tipping point where there will be no way to reverse the trend. The number 450 ppm is the absolute last chance.

The scientists, environmentalists and other knowledgeable people who have intently studied global warming say that concentration of CO2 has to be reduced to 350 ppm for us to avert a planetary global disaster. The human race has to realize that there is environmental and climatic disaster underway as the earth heats up and global temperature edges upward to the 2º centigrade rise. This is essential to prevent reaching the point of no return.

Acidification of the oceans will surely kill millions of fish and marine life and the melting of the arctic ice sheet will be irreversible and will bring on that destructive rise in sea levels. Witness the recent break off of a huge slab of the Antarctic glacier, a piece the size of Manhattan.

In Bangladesh, 30 million people were displaced last year due to floods, tens of millions more will be displaced in the coming years. With the rising sea levels, it will reach one meter in the next ten to twenty years. They are forecasting catastrophic effects of climate change and the government is demanding compensation from the highest polluting countries.

In the Philippines, only 9% of the original forest cover remains but this is being illegally logged and hacked-to-death by loggers that flout the law and act with impunity protected by corrupt politicians who fund their reelection with the proceeds. Hypocritically, their reelection propaganda usually says they will fight corruption, end impunity and give environmental protection top priority.

Philippine environmentalists and anti-mining advocates were outraged recently when the chief of the Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB), Leo Jasareno, announced at a mining conference that President Benigno Aquino III had given mining corporations an exemption from the strict Executive Order 23 (EO23) that forbids the cutting of trees in natural and residual forests provided that they would join the National Greening programme that aims to plants 1.5 million trees in the next six years. The Office of the President has denied the report and said that the President only announced the names of the six companies that already had exemptions. This is a troubling revelation. No exemptions ought to be given and large scale open-pit mining must be stopped.

Executive Order 23 is the only bulwark that is holding back the waiting chain-saw gangs of the loggers and insatiable desires of the mining corporations. They want to get at the minerals under the forests. That means large scale forest destruction and many more related environmental and human disasters like landslides, river and sea poisoning, dangerous dams holding back toxic mining sludge, loss for ancestral land rights, loss of farming land and natural water sources.

The burning of cleared forests causes a huge release of CO2 and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, that's a whopping 16% of all gases released worldwide and equal to all the gases released by almost every vehicle, plane or ship in the world. To make matters worse, the loss of the trees themselves will leave huge amounts of CO2 unabsorbed. Forest trees are the CO2 sponges of the planet.

I am not sure if the 2000, two-meter tall, grafted fruit tree saplings that I plant annually through the Preda Fair Trade will of any help but it will off-set the emissions I create. We can all do something to stop the deforestation and planting a tree is a good start to heal a wounded planet.
Blessed Pedro Calungsod and the Youth of Bohol

By Bishop Leonardo Y. Medroso

S omewhere in the Eastern part of the City of Tagbilaran, in a place where the urban trash has for time immemorial been dumped, sorted out and combed through to recover some items for resale, along the boundary that civilly cuts off Tagbilaran from the town of Baclayon, in a secluded sitio of Barangay Dampas pops up a new building visible to passersby due to its pleasing yet unassuming dirty-white coloration. It has two classrooms with a floor elegantly tiled ready to receive twenty-five to thirty young students. Soon, it will with pride and poise bear the name Beato Pedro Calungsod Foundation Training Center for the Youth.

The structure, small it may appear, is the incipient realization of a dream that is ambitious in its vision and goals, extent, and intensity. For, the founding officers and members of the Foundation that give it existence have been impelled not by any hint of monetary consideration, but by their obligation to society and by their Christian responsibility to love and care. In their meeting some two years ago or thereabouts, they saw and were shocked to face ugly reality. The number of school dropouts among the youth has risen into a mind-boggling proportion. As responsible citizens they have seen that society seems not to care for them and their future. For sure, the government that is tasked to give general education to its citizenry and, therefore, has the primary obligation to look after this social problem, has not been remiss in this matter. For so long has it been dwelling on this snag and has tried several means to untangle itself from it. But the enormity of the problem is simply staggering. The government for one does not have the sufficient resources to manage this increasing dysfunctional state of the young and their poor families.

The founding officers saw this problem, and decided to throw in its share to its eventual resolution. They are for sure not dreamy eyed individuals. They are hard-core realists, persons who could call a spade a spade. If the government is financially incapable of meeting the enormity of the problem, they too are aware that they do not have the monetary resources needed for the task at hand. But they believe in their resourcefulness, their native creativity to look for solutions to problems that come their way. Huddling together and discussing, they came up with the concept of partnership, tying up, that is, with other generous and well-intentioned citizens and organizations, and forging them into multi-sectoral stakeholders. Pooling together their competencies as well as their variegated capabilities they can serve as a network of relationships, building up that bridge to fill up the gap confronting the youth and their poor families on the one end and, the responsible individual citizens, the different communities and organizations, and the government of the Province of Bohol on the other.

After all, every responsible citizen or social organization in the Province has the primary obligation to contribute to national and local development that has long been overdue. It is high time that every Filipino no longer waits for the government to do the things for him. He must do his share.

It is along this line of thought that the Beato Pedro Calungsod Foundation was born. To propel it to action and to persevere in its pursuit for the star, it envisioned itself as: “A Foundation of Christ’s faithful in the Diocese of Tagbilaran, inspired by the Word of God, nourished by the Eucharist, strengthened by constant prayer, ever conscious of its social and spiritual life in the integral human development.”

It is not mere convenience that the Beato Pedro Calungsod was taken as the title of the Foundation. The founding officers saw the heroism of this young gentleman, a martyr whose life of heroism could be a constant inspiration. Because of the Faith that he had embraced and boldly proclaimed, he was ordered to be killed by a primitive Chieftain in Guam, brutally executed by a tribal soldier. The youthful saint, who, as tradition has it, lived in Bohol, Cebu, and Iloilo, was known for these virtues, to wit: scientific and intellectual discipline; patience; hard work; bravery; and lived Faith.

This kind of life could indeed be the needed inspiration for the youth of Bohol, a life around which values-driven transformation programs and activities could be drawn up. The Foundation is hoping that this could be one of the entry points to touch base with the out-of-school youth and their families, and a medium for transforming societies into centers for integral human development.
By Bishop Joel Z. Baylon

We are coming to the end of a wonderful year for youth ministry. On 16 December last year the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines launched the Year of the Youth (CBCP-YOTY) in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Episcopal Commission on Youth.

With the strong desire to raise awareness about young people and to promote a pastoral ministry by the Church hand in hand with them, this CBCP-YOTY also wanted to “...appreciate our young people as a gift to the Church, celebrating their protagonism, their boundless creativity and youthful enthusiasm. We want to give them priority and preference in our ecclesial life, recognizing the unique contribution of youth ministry to the Church.

“... (and) aim at ‘putting out into the deep’ of youth ministry as envisioned by KA-LAKBAY, while accompanying the young to become more responsibly involved in the transformation of the Church and society, in the protection of life and the whole of creation, and in the missionary activity as leading characters in evangelization...” (from “Young People: Stand Firm in Christ”, a Pastoral Letter for the celebration of the CBCP-YOTY)

Through a variety of projects and activities the Episcopal Commission on Youth (ECY) provided young people a climate of joyful celebration and the opportunity to be part of this CBCP-YOTY. There was the visit of the National Youth Cross to all the different apostolic vicariates, prelatures, dioceses and archdioceses of the country. A colorfully painted Cross (that depicted the many forms of church ministries and services that the young get involved in) was made precisely for this purpose. In every place it went, the National Youth Cross was borne on the shoulders of young people, and it saw their youthful enthusiasm, their youthful dances and songs, and it kept vigil with them in their simple faith-filled prayer.

Then there were the activities to encourage young people to get involved in advocacy. For one, there was the RH Bill issue. During the CBCP-YOTY many youth groups joined in signature campaigns to protest against the Bill and proclaimed their support for the dignity and supreme value of life. Also, in certain selected cities, while the National Youth Cross was visiting, a Youth Forum was also held. This provided young people the chance to discuss, talk and ask about burning issues and relevant topics with experts and persons in authority.

Also in response to the call to actively care for and protect Mother Earth, the project 1 Million Trees was launched. Many local churches and youth groups lent their support to this endeavor and signified the number of trees they have planted. In this regard it is a joy to note that the government, on both national and local levels, joined in this noteworthy project by making seedlings available and in some cases even identified and provided areas where to plant the trees. This is definitely an ongoing project that the ECY hopes to pursue beyond the CBCP-YOTY.

Without forgetting the religious aspect of the CBCP-YOTY,
regional retreats for youth ministers were also conducted, covering the twelve ecclesiastical regions of the Philippines. The spiritual exercises were facilitated by all the ECY bishop-members. For the many others who could not be accommodated in these regional retreats, there were suggested modules for spiritual exercises and the like. The CBCP-YOTY was also a time to deepen a young person’s relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternally-young, Companion and Friend of the youth.

And finally, to echo the recently concluded World Youth Day in Madrid, Spain—which was participated in by about two thousand delegates from our country—a weeklong National Youth Day (NYD) was celebrated last 14-19 November at several festival sites in Metro Manila. This served as the highlight of the CBCP-YOTY. More than three thousand young delegates from all over the country came. Like the WYD in Spain, the theme for this NYD was “Planted and Built Up in Jesus Christ, Firm in the Faith” (Col 2:7). For three days the young delegates listened to talks and shared their experiences regarding their faith journey as individuals and as members of their respective church settings. They shared about their small and big efforts at witnessing to Jesus, they expressed their fears and anxieties vis-à-vis challenges and threats to their faith, they consoled and supported each other in prayer and comforting words, and together they committed themselves to stand “firm in the faith… and remain planted and built up in Jesus Christ.”

And, yes, as a fitting conclusion to this memorable YOTY, at the final program of the NYD last November 18, the John Paul II National Youth Ministry Awards were given to twenty-five individuals and groups in recognition for their valuable contribution to the birth, growth and development of the Catholic youth ministry in the Philippines. A couple of the awardees had since passed away, and received their awards posthumously. But they all were duly recognized and deeply appreciated for their work for and among the young. There could not have been a better way to end that night and the Year of the Youth as well.

Truly the CBCP-YOTY was a special year of grace. We once again affirm the precious gift of youth ministry in the Church. We rejoice to see our young people encounter God in and through our parish communities, schools, youth organizations and movements, etc…, thus discovering the Church as a Mother, nurturing and loving, where they find comfort and strength, inspiration and grace, as they carve their future with meaning and purpose, and make themselves available for loving service and sincere witness.

As we come to the end of this CBCP-YOTY, we hold on to and heed the principles, directives and recommendations set by KA-LAKBAY, the Directory for Catholic Youth Ministry in the Philippines, “a landmark event in our communal journey”. And then there is the “YouCat” (Youth Catechesis), copies of which were given by Pope Benedict XVI to the WYD pilgrims in Madrid last August. This “youthful” document, derived from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, will be without doubt a great help in young
people’s growth in their knowledge, love and following of Jesus Christ.

We are all filled with hope as we face the daunting challenge of making the Church a relevant experience for the many other young people who remain on the outskirts of its life and activity, who don’t feel they belong to it—young people who are lost in a harsh, uncaring world and yet ever hungry for the touch of God. This CBCP-YOTY has taught us hope, for it has shown us that just as in the past the Lord sustained the first disciples with His presence and grace, so He has done to us in the 25 years of our existence as a ministry of the Church for and with the young; and He will do so still in the days ahead, so that—as the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines strongly emphasized—“youth ministry should be assured of the fullest attention and highest priority in every way by all in the Church” (PCP II Decrees, Art 50, #2).

May the Blessed Virgin Mary lead the young to her Son Jesus Christ!

(Most Rev. Joel Z. Baylon is the bishop of the Diocese of Legazpi and the Chair of the Episcopal Commission on Youth of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines)
Youth! The dawning of the future, the shaper of tomorrow! If the child is the father of the man, then youth must be that crucial stage in-between that would determine whether the child is going to be a good father or a bad father of the man.

Youth can be the meeting point of great potentials on the one hand, with all the effusive energy and creativity inherent in them, and on the other hand, also of possible destructive forces. Youth is the junction where one takes a life-defining choice. It is that transitory part of life that is still seeking stability and maturity.

That's reason enough to put utmost attention and care on them. All sectors—Church, schools, civil society, government, media, etc.—ought to have a permanent concern for their well-being not only in the physical sense, but more so in the spiritual and moral sense. They need to get their act together to draw the best potentials from the youth.

By sheer number alone, barring the so-called demographic winter some countries are now suffering, the youth make for a tremendous force in the Church and in the world. They simply need to be well formed so that they too, and not just the elders, can help in shaping the kind of world and future they want and ought to live, the world God wants for us.

They have to be gradually drawn to assume increasing responsibilities, instead of leaving them to fall into self-absorption and isolationism that are always a danger, because in spite of the new technologies that in theory should promote sociability, with the wrong attitudes and habits, the youth can rather harden in their egotism, vanity and individualism. Instead of getting more deeply in touch with reality, they can get lost in a world of virtuality, creating a bubble for themselves.

We have to be wary of the multiple effects—that both good and bad—that any social stimulus can provoke in the youth. We should overcome our tendency to be naive in this area, looking at world developments in a simplistic black-and-white perspective. We have to discern the finer points, the complex knots of elements of varying moral values, and we should be able to sort them out properly. We have to monitor the developments closely and be quick to read the trends these elements can produce, the signs of the times, so as to dominate and direct them properly. Just like everyone else, the youth should strive to be effective, docile and loving instruments of divine providence.

**Doctrine and criteria for our confusing times**

Toward this end, the youth need to be given clear doctrine and criteria, based on our natural law and our Christian faith, so that their innate dynamism would be well-guided and oriented. With these, they can avoid the pitfalls of exaggerated idealism and activism, to mention a few of the anamalies that usually threaten them. Some other menaces can be extreme, radical independence on the one hand, and the tendency to fall into a herd mentality, on the other, which show a certain degree of instability in their condition. They can be at the same time both assertive and recessive, outgoing and reclusive. In fact, many are now the cases of young people with mental ailments due to sharp inconsistencies in their life and behavior, hidden successfully for a while until they just break down.

Times are now complicated and confusing. The youth today are exposed to more things, both good and bad, constructive and destructive, than their counterpart of yesterday. They can flip quickly from local issues to the global ones, thanks to our
new technologies. They now have in their hands powerful tools and instruments that can be used either for good or for evil.

Besides, the world environment has changed tremendously in so short a time. Materialism and commercialism are far fiercer in the present than in the past. And we are actually wallowing in a cesspool of secularism and relativism, made worse by the fact that these anomalies can now be better disguised and rationalized. Of course, many good developments are also taking place—a resurgence of spirituality and a sharper sense of justice and social concern can be noted in many parts of the world.

More than just being given doctrine and criteria, the youth must make these doctrine and criteria their own, to the point that these become their convictions, enabling them to think, judge, speak and act properly, and later to love and enter into a life of commitment. They have to go beyond the stage of theories, clichés and slogans. They need to be the youth of convictions and commitment, living a life of deepening integrity and consistency.

This is the ideal situation. We need youth who are active agents of change for the better in society. But how can this happen.

**The individual person first and always**

I imagine that first of all, we have to take care of each one of them. Before they are treated as a group, a class or sector, they have to be considered individually and personally. Each one has to be known as he really is—his character and temperament, his strengths and weaknesses, his likes and dislikes, his talents and shortcomings, his dreams and fears, etc.

It’s important that each of them is able to share his thoughts and desires with someone he can trust completely. Later on, he should be able to share in varying degrees as prudence dictates, all he has—the inner things as well as the external things—with more and more people.

What is important is that each one feels loved and cared for so he too can learn to love and care for the others. The earlier one realizes deeply that life is relational that involves not only physical and material things, but also and especially spiritual and moral things, the better for him and for everyone else.

Everyone has to learn how to love properly, based on the love of God and not just any form of human attraction. This is more properly known as communion. This realization will serve as the seed for the youth to become active agents in social change.

Social action should always be a function of charity, truth and justice, and should foster communion. While it involves issues, it should not just stop there, but rather proceed to build up communion. It should never get out of this sphere, endowing it only with good intentions and some forms of humanitarianism and philanthropy, which, while good are never enough.

In this regard, it is crucial that one gets to live family life, fraternity and friendship really well, since these would be the basic training ground and the launching pad for one to go into bigger social involvement. In fact, what would even be better is when one gets to share the intimate details of his spiritual life—his struggles and aspirations—in the context of spiritual direction. This will help him to really get connected with God, and because of that, also with the others in a deeper and more meaningful way.

**The formation needed**

It is obvious that the youth need a special kind of formation, one that is truly adapted to their personal and peculiar condition. This formation should gener-
ally embrace the human, spiritual, religious-doctrinal, professional and apostolic aspects. They have to be given a holistic approach that is given in a gradual but continuing way.

Everyone needs this kind for formation, but for the youth, this need assumes a certain aspect of urgency. The basic human virtues like humility, sincerity, prudence, justice, courtesy, etc. are a must before they can be expected to grow in their spiritual life, and enter into a healthy relationship with others, knowing how to dialogue, how to handle differences of views and opinions, how to keep a high moral and human tone in his dealings.

The youth should learn how to be sport not only in games but also in the discussion of issues. They have to be broadminded, capable of appreciating the differences and great variety of ideas that come their way. They should know how to dialogue, willing to listen and to learn. They should have a good understanding of the nature, character and purpose of human freedom. They have to know how to dominate their passions, giving priority to reason and good manners.

Of immediate relevance are the virtues of temperance and fortitude, since the youth are usually harassed by sensual, material and earthly allurements that can compromise their spiritual life, and therefore their social commitment. And they need to be strong to undertake a rigorous effort to attain the desired goals in life and society.

As to their spiritual life, they of course have to know how to pray, how to keep conversing with God in any and all circumstances. They should know the value of sacrifice, and the sacraments. Regular confession and communion should be greatly encouraged. This is very crucial, since social action is basically and inherently a spiritual affair more than anything else. It’s not just activism.

Of course, the spiritual life has to be nourished with a continuing formation in doctrine. A piety without doctrine is a dangerous affair, prone to superstition and rash actions. The youth need to digest the Church’s social doctrine that can be described as the culmination of all the spiritual and moral teaching of Christ and the Church, and their application to society. So they should give due importance to continuing study and research.

Another basic aspect of their formation is their professional life. All the brilliant ideas and words about social concern, all their fervent claims for righteousness and justice would fall apart if the youth have a wrong understanding and attitude toward work. Work is what converts ideals to reality, and so it’s crucial that they work and work properly, with the right motivation and orientation, which is none other than the love of God which in turn should inspire our love for the others.

Then there is the need for them to develop a true concern for the others, that is, that they have a driving apostolic concern and zeal. They have to be made to understand as early as possible that social action is apostolate, bringing friends and people close to God.

In short, to be active agents of social change for the better, the youth need to acquire the very mind and heart of Christ, with the same sentiments and desires and willingness to give everything out of love.
Climate crisis tackled in national youth forum

MANILA, Nov. 24, 2011—More than 200 Filipino children and youths from across the country gathered recently for a national forum to address the issue on climate change.

The youth workshop dubbed as Pinoy+Youth+Power in a Changing Climate was part of the National Climate Change Consciousness Week with the theme ‘Creating Convergence on Climate Change’.

The climate forum aimed to mainstream the participation of Filipino young people and children in addressing the challenges of the climate crisis.

Nobel Laureate and former United States Vice President Al Gore lauded the youth forum saying that ‘it is events like yours today that will empower our youth to reach new heights and take on the challenge of climate change.’

‘As you know very well, climate change will have significant impact on the Philippines. It’s important for young people to learn about the science and prepare to action. As an island nation, you are vulnerable to rising seas, intense storms, and the loss of ocean resources that provide food and economic opportunities to all Filipinos,’ explained Gore in a message sent for the national gathering.

Gore heads the global climate campaign The Climate Reality Project that has more than 5 million members and supporters worldwide.

Commissioner Lucille Sering, Vice-Chairperson of the Climate Change Commission said the Commission makes it a priority to involve young people since they are "more vulnerable to the effects of climate change in which they face today making their future at stake."

The young delegates had a series of workshops and interactive inputs enabling them to understand the basics of climate science, simple solutions and advocacies to secure their future.

They discussed and approved a national youth climate change agenda to mainstream their significant participation in implementing the National Climate Change Action Plan (NCCAP).

The Climate Reality Project’s presenter and international environment youth speaker Alec Loorz of Kids vs. Global Warming and Hamzah Ramadhan of Inconvenient Youth Indonesia shared their climate crisis advocacies through less-carbon video messaging and online video conference.

'Indeed, the young people are vulnerable to the effects of climate crisis which may burn their future. It is their future which is at stake and together through this event, they would be able to mold this future and make the world a better place to live in,' said The Climate Reality Project's Philippine District Manager Rodne Galicha.

Held November 22 at the SMX Mall of Asia Convention Centre in Pasay City, the national youth workshop was part of the first carbon neutral event in the Philippines.

The event was organized by the Climate Change Commission in partnership with Al Gore’s The Climate Reality Project, National Youth Commission, Sangguniang Kabataan Federation, Council for the Welfare of Children, UNICEF-Philippines and USAID-Philippines. (CBCPNews)

China and the disabled, small signs of hope for the future

GUANGZHOU, China, Nov. 30, 2011—The new law currently being examined by the government of Guangdong on the registration of NGOs in China has reopened the debate on the situation of disabled people in the country and society’s attitude toward them. Several sources contacted by AsiaNews, explain that the draft law "is not so much a step forward in the registration of NGOs, as in the vision that China reserves towards the disabled".

According to the draft, Guangdong (the country's richest province, the real "engine" of economic growth) is preparing to eliminate the role of "government patron," which is required for each non-governmental organization that wants to register and then operate in the Chinese territory. This figure is the biggest obstacle to NGOs: often it is a government controller, who severely restricts the work of social organizations.

The new law, which should come into force next July 1, covers eight categories of NGOs: several analysts explain, however, that the categories do not include those that deal with human or political rights. A source tells AsiaNews: "The laws in China are very complicated to analyze. But the fact that we are speaking of people with disabilities, of the non-governmental organizations that care for them, is in fact a sign of a great opening."

Another source, who works in Guangzhou in a hospice for disabled, agrees with the analysis: "China has always had a very hard stance towards illnesses. But in recent times, something is changing: in recent months, for example, we organized a gala dinner to raise money for our patients. And for the first time, a Chinese group gave us what we needed. Usually foreigners cover the main part."

For cultural and political reasons, Chinese society has always had a natural repulsion for the disabled and discriminated against them keeping them at home marginalized from the population, and they were subject to daily persecution. But the law, and these testimonies seem to revolutionize the attitude towards their situation.

In short, the source concludes, there is "a palpable increase in the sympathy and interest in the issue. It is no small thing, these are important signals because social discrimination is the worst enemy we face every day. We still don't know much about this law, but I think symbolizes the fact that in the end, people with disabilities have become part of the country." (AsiaNews)
Empty cradles, the alarm and the commitment of the Korean Church

DAEJEON, South Korea, Nov. 28, 2011—Korea needs "a new culture of life. The Catholic Church always points this out, but for us Koreans it is a major challenge on the ground. We must strive to change social attitudes by example, teaching but also concrete help," says Msgr. Lazarus You Heung-sik, bishop of Daejeon and president of the Episcopal Commission for Pastoral care for migrants.

The bishop is very familiar with the matter: "The problem of birth and of respect for life are central to the survival of our society. But there are many factors that threaten them: there is a cultural factor, of course, which, however, is in addition to an economic and labour system that penalizes births. The growth in standards of living is accompanied by an increased automation of industrial production, and this eliminates jobs: people are afraid, and think less and less of having children."

Msgr. You fears are supported by data: out of a total of 222 nations worldwide, South Korea is 217th in annual birth rates. It has slipped downward in rankings yet again, rankings that have always seen the Koreans in the lowest places, where the average is 1.2 children per household, a figure similar to that of Taiwan, Japan and Macao, all countries with a high degree of well-being, but threatened by an aging population and social disintegration.

Having children, Msgr. You continues, "is the basis of Catholic teaching. Conjugal love has to pass through conception to make the family complete. The love of the Lord, then, does the rest. If you forget this factor it is useless to talk about anything else. Korean Catholics know this, but we're trying to improve their sensitivity towards this".

This stimulus does not pass only through good teaching: "We realize that the cost of living is a limit to births, and for about 10 years in my diocese we have been trying to help families with many children also from the material point of view. Each year, the Feast of the Holy Family, we give an award to the 5 largest families of the diocese."

The award is consistent: "A scholarship to the tune of 5 million won (about 3 thousand Euros) for each winner. Funds that we collect through a collection among all the faithful, and we hope to continue to collect ever more generously. Life is a gift which should be fostered at all costs, and is a great challenge that we intend to win." (AsiaNews)

Java: Muslims and Catholics marching together to promote good "jihad"

JAKARTA, Indonesia, Nov. 29, 2011— A major national event of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has crossed the country, from Surabaya to Jakarta for more than 1000 km, to promote the original definition of "jihad" holy war, which in recent years has taken on a pejorative meaning because of its misuse by Islamic radicals. Not only have thousands of followers of NU responded to the national event, but also a good number of Catholics from various parishes in the north of Java, an event that aims to promote pluralism in the country.

Two priests in the diocese of Purwokerto joined the demonstration, when the NU march reached the area of their parishes. They were Fr. Francis Windyantardi, pastor of Sacred Heart Church, and another priest of the Church of St. Joseph in Mejasem, along with many seminarians. The original term of "jihad" on Java referred to the guerrilla war conducted in November 1945 against the Dutch colonial regime.

The main roads north of Java were occupied by thousands of NU followers loudly proclaiming their pride to be moderate Muslims, waving the red and white of Indonesia, together with those of NU. The most prominent NU political figure, the Minister of Human Resources Muhaimin Iskandar stressed the need to give voice to the spirit of good "jihad", as had been promoted by their ancestors in 1945. For this reason, priests and seminarians were happy to join the event, along with leading Muslim clerics.

According to Father Francis Widyantardi, this gesture was a positive response on the part of the management of NU to address the crucial problem of Indonesia: the de-radicalization of Islamic fundamentalism. Under the motto "from NU to Indonesia" the "jihadist resolution " wanted to promote the effort to elevate the spirit of pluralism, reduce poverty and address other forms of injustice. (AsiaNews)
Colombo: sister of Mother Teresa arrested for “selling” children

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka, Nov. 28, 2011—Sister Mary Eliza, from the Missionaries of Charity, has been in prison since Friday night accused of selling children. Since the congregation was founded, she is the first nun of Mother Teresa to be arrested. An anonymous tipoff informed police, which then burst into the Prem Nivesa of Moratuwa, a hostel for young unwed mothers run by the Sisters of Mother Teresa and arrested the nun. The hostel is now impounded.

Sister Eliza, superior of Prem Nivesa, is now in jail at the Women’s Prison of Welikada, and has not been able to see a lawyer yet. Today, a judge is set to charge her formally with illegal trafficking of children.

Last Wednesday, a group of people led by Anoma Dissanayake, head of the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA), surrounded the Prem Nivesa hostel to examine the situation of the children and mothers living in the facility run by the Missionaries.

“Police and NCPA officials burst into the home at around 11 am, causing panic. They checked every nook and cranny in the facility and took away our files,” a nun told AsiaNews.

Two days later, on Friday evening, police agents took Sister Eliza and two nuns to a judge’s home. Sister Eliza was then taken by car to Welikada Prison, whilst the two other nuns were brought back to the convent.

“Police, NCPA officials and media rushed to our facility,” Sister Eliza said before her arrest. “They cross-examined the unwed mothers and took away many documents.”

“We have never been involved in child trafficking. It is against our faith,” she reiterated. “Our mission is to take care of unwed mothers and their children. We have never taken money for our work. Children are adopted in accordance with the law.”

The circumstances surrounding the arrest of Sister Eliza remain murky. Some local media accused the Sisters of “selling the future of the country to foreigners for few thousand rupees”.

However, the Missionaries of Charity believe their mother superior is in prison because the home opened its doors to an underage pregnant woman without informing the police and because the number of children in the facility was greater than the number reported in the registry, which had not been updated.

The confusion is compounded by the silence of the Church, which has not yet issued an official statement about Sister Eliza’s arrest.

There are nearly 760 convents of Mother Teresa worldwide with more than 5,000 missionaries. The Prem Nivesa has 75 children, 20 pregnant women and 12 new mothers.

The National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) is an independent organisation under the Office of the President.

(AsiaNews)

Fukushima: Ban on 4322 rice farms, plant manager hospitalized

TOKYO, Japan, Nov. 29, 2011—The Fukushima Prefecture has decided to ban the trade of rice from 2,381 farms in Nihonmatsu and Motomiya as a result of high levels of radioactive cesium (above 500 becquerels / kg) found in the harvests in the area near the cities of Date and Fukushima. The provision, the latest in a series since the crisis at the nuclear power plant damaged by the earthquake / tsunami of 11 March, thus reinforces the ban already in place in recent days and brings to 4322 the total number of farms involved.

Meanwhile controversy surrounds yesterday announcement by Masao Yoshida, director of the Fukushima power plant that he was to be hospitalised. According to the Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry, Yukio Edan, at a press conference Yoshida is not being hospitalised due to “exposure to radiation”. If the possibility emerges that his illness is linked to the nuclear crisis, he added, "all the information would be disclosed immediately." TEPCO, the operator did not reveal the nature of the illness, and even the values related to his exposure to radiation for privacy reasons.

"It important not to give negative signals to the public on this staff turnover at the helm of the ailing facility", clarified Edan, somewhat surprised at TEPCO’s statement. Yoshida, 56 years, it will be replaced December 1 by Takeishi Takahashi, 54, another official of the utility specialized in the management of nuclear power plants. (AsiaNews / Agencies)
Aquino Must Swiftly Bring Justice to Victims and Families of Maguindanao Massacre

The Visayas Clergy Discernment Group (VCDG) is alarmed that while the Supreme Court swiftly handed out decisions that would allow former President Gloria Arroyo to travel out of the country and the Pasay Regional Trial Court quickly issued a warrant of arrest to her, the victims and relatives of the Maguindanao Massacre are still searching for justice.

Two years ago, on November 23, 2009, armed men killed in the most barbaric and ruthless way, 58 people in a convoy of supporters of now Governor Esmael Mangudadatu who were on their way to file Mangudadatu’s certificate of candidacy. Those killed included 33 journalists who would cover the occasion. The Maguindanao Massacre is the most brutal and unparalleled event of its kind in recent history. Allegedly perpetrated by the most trusted political allies of former President Arroyo in Mindanao, it was also the worst case of media killing in the world.

Church’s doctrines have recognized media’s role in providing information at the service of the common good (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2494). In the same breath, the Roman Catholic Church’s Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) in 1991 also condemns patronage politics and political dynasties which lopsidedly concentrated power on a few established families (cf. PCP II, #24).

Moreover, PCP II exhorts politicians to lead in renewing politics, to defend and promote justice, and to “put teeth to good legislation” by strictly enforcing a correct system of rewards and punishment (cf. PCP II, #350-352).

Today, however, two years since the mass murders, while more than 100 people led by former Maguindanao Governor Andal Ampatuan, Sr. are on trial for the massacre, no one has been indicted yet. This means that the victims and their loved ones have not found justice that is due them.

President Aquino recently said that “the guilty should be made accountable” because doing otherwise means allowing anyone “to abuse our people.” We are then calling on the Aquino Government, the Department of Justice and other government instrumentalities to speed up prosecution of those who are responsible for the Maguindanao Massacre.

While former President Arroyo and her partners must be tried for alleged electoral cheating, efforts of the Aquino government to give justice to victims and relatives of the Maguindanao Massacre should not result to a compromise and, worse, exoneration of those responsible, for the sake of pinning down Arroyo.

President Aquino must be true to his recent declaration that, “We are all working for a new Philippines… where whoever does wrong… is punished, a country where justice rules.” Meanwhile, he also said that he expects the massacre trial to go beyond his term. To be true to his reform agenda, the Aquino government must urgently deliver justice to the victims of the massacre.

Bishop Gerardo Alminaza, DD
Head Convenor
Visayas Clergy Discernment Group
November 22, 2011
Open Letter to Fr. Francois Laisney
And the priests of the Society of St. Pius X

Dear Father Laisney:

AS the Archbishop of Davao and duly appointed shepherd of the Catholic faith of this local Church I would like to remind you again of a basic and fundamental principle from the Code of Canon Law. This principle must regulate and guide our priestly ministry.

I am writing this reminder as from a friend and gentleman to another. This reminder is also directed to your Society here in Davao City and through you to some of our people who have innocently sought your ministerial services. This fundamental principle is the authentic right and authority to minister here. If you then are validly ordained as priest you have this right undoubtedly. But without genuine authorization or approval from me as Archbishop and Local Ordinary, you cannot, and are not allowed, to exercise that right within my jurisdiction and territory. You do not have the canonical faculty or permit which can only be given in writing by me.

I assume that you know very well that priests not canonically incardinated in our Diocese must have the required written faculty to minister here. You also very well know that even transient priests, who are not irregular, need to present a celebret or certification from their own bishop or superior when they come here to preside in liturgical celebration or administer the Sacraments. This you do not have. And even if you ask I cannot grant it because you do not have the canonical status.

The reason for this has already been given and explained by our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI in his Papal Letter on the Society of Saint Pius X dated 12 March 2009. In reference to this point he clearly stated:

“The fact that the Society of Saint Pius X does not possess a canonical status in the Church is not, in the end, based on disciplinary but on doctrinal reasons. As long as the Society does not have a canonical status in the Church, its ministers do not exercise legitimate ministry in the Church.”

It is very clear that you cannot exercise legitimately your priestly right to minister in our Church territory or Diocese. And the reason—which perhaps you failed to explain to our people—is the grave error in doctrine committed by your Society against the authority of the Pope and the Vatican Council, a serious offense and crime against the unity of the Church, our unfortunate schism.

On this point I wonder why you did not explain to others that there are two kinds of excommunication: ipso facto or automatic (latae sententiae), and sub judice or under investigation (ferendae sententiae). Of course I can understand why you could not and did not explain that because of automatic excommunication which does not need official Church declaration you still remain excommunicated in conscience because of doctrinal error. This is the reason why you and your Society do not have canonical status.

To push the argument further, especially for the benefit of the lay people, this point means that you and your Society are not in the approved list of recognized ministers and society within the Church. No amount of reasoning, like the perceived necessity, the appeal to the people, the “salvation of souls,” the Good Samaritan metaphor, can confer ordinary jurisdiction or grant authorization to you except the local bishop. And you cannot apply one canonical provision and violate another in your argumentation.

Please, pardon me for saying that the logical consequence of the above points I presented is that as illegitimate minister you are intruding without permission into our communities and misleading our people. As official shepherd of the local flock I cannot help saying that you are trespassing our private domain, sneaking into our fold and snatching away like wolves in sheep’s clothing our innocent sheep (Mt 7:15).

As the chief shepherd of the local flock I am aware of my own shortcomings and limitations and those of my clergy, religious and lay faithful. Yes, there are lapses and questionable practices and behaviour in the liturgical, pastoral and moral lives of our communities. We are not ignoring them. They make us humble and conscious of God’s mercy and forgiveness, and encourage us to struggle for authenticity and credibility. Our Archdiocesan Liturgical Center under Fr. Joel Caasi will in due time prepare our people to celebrate the Missa Extraordinaria in Latin with propriety and dignity when needed.

I have to say this as spiritual leader and ultimately responsible to God and the Pope for the welfare of the flock entrusted to me. I am sorry I don’t enjoy and relish this public exchange of open letters which you provoked. But I am sure our people—priests, religious, lay, especially the Latin Mass Society—will respond to your misleading statements in due time and in the appropriate manner.

With every good wish and prayer, I remain

Your friend and brother in Christ,

+FERNANDO R. CAPALLA
Archbishop of Davao
November 8, 2011
THE delegates to the 17th Biennial National Convention of Sangguniang Laiko ng Pilipinas (“LAIKO”), composed of the leaders of fifty (50) Archdiocesan/Diocesan Councils of the Laity and fifty (50) affiliated associations, organizations and communities, as it is hereby resolved that:

A. The Sangguniang Laiko and its Board of Trustees will:
   1. Prepare and submit a Position Paper to both houses of Congress, vehemently rejecting HB 4244 and SB 2378 (former Reproductive Health Bills, now renamed as Responsible Parenthood Bills) and other DEATH bills;
   2. Assist Diocese/Archdiocese to form and organize, where there are none, Diocesan/Archdiocesan Council of the Laity where Transparochial lay organizations are included, one of the tasks of which will be to ensure that parish pastoral councils are in turn organized, composed of parish-based lay organizations, among others; and
   3. Accredit a National Core of Formators to train the leaders and members of lay organizations, nationwide, on an ongoing basis.

B. The Sangguniang Laiko recommends to the Archdioceses and Dioceses that:
   1. All parishes within their respective Arch/diocese shall seriously pursue organizing of basic ecclesial communities as channels for the New Evangelization.
   2. Through the Parish Pastoral Councils and Archdiocesan/Diocesan Councils of the Laity, a Pastoral Plan for the involvement of the laity shall be formulated through a consultative and participatory process, where lay programs and activities are aligned with the vision, mission and thrusts of their respective parishes and dioceses/ archdioceses; and further ensuring that there are clear channels of communication from the BEC, the parish, vicariate district, and archdiocese/diocese.
   3. More lay leaders and individuals shall be encouraged to actively involve in Archdiocesan/Diocesan Councils of the Laity and Parish Pastoral Councils; however, at the parish level, the maximum number of organizations one can join should be limited to two (2).
   4. The archdiocese/diocese through their parishes shall sustain initiatives for the continuing and advanced formation of the laity which will equip them to be more effective in their leadership roles.

C. The Sangguniang Laiko makes these general recommendations:
   1. All concerned ministries shall intensify value formation among the youth by integrating youth evangelization programs with family evangelization.
   2. Parish Pastoral Councils shall coordinate with Youth Ministries within the Church and secular youth organizations the involvement of the youth in building up the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) where the youth will find meaningful expression of their identity and contribute to the animation of the BECs.
   3. All the laity shall strengthen through education and communication their capabilities to mobilize material and human resources among their ranks in order to sustain programs for various lay ministries.
   4. Parish Pastoral Councils shall coordinate with sectoral ministries and programs, local politicians, business enterprises, government and media institutions to maximize their contributions to the efforts of the New Evangelization, and to take advantage of these collaborations to reach communities and sectors with special needs.
   5. Parish Pastoral Councils shall address not only the moral and spiritual formation of the laity, but also creatively implement programs that will help uplift their economic and social conditions such as opportunities for income generation, increased access to social services and social participation.

Done this 23rd day of October, 2011 at Pope Pius XII Catholic Center, U.N. Manilia.
Accountability of public officials

“The President... may be removed from office, on impeachment for, and conviction of... treason...” (Phil. Constitution, Art XI, Sec. 2)

The above-cited basic ethico-legal provision carried three salient connotations. First, it speaks of an indictment—“impeachment”—that is not only inherently serious but also rather extensive in shameful implications. Then, it points at the causal premise thereof in terms of the gross crime—“treason”—in form of not simply betraying public trust but also by way of aiding the enemy. Lastly, it is a legislation that only comes from the Fundamental Law of the Land—“Constitution”—but also drawn and sealed precisely by the maternal origin of the public official in mind. This in no way means that impeachment is in order, that treason has been committed, that the Constitution has been violated. Neither does it intend to imply that the wheels of justice should now make the turns precisely due to transgression of the Fundamental Law of the Land. This is merely envisioned to call more serious attention to the composite phenomenon of public funds being diverted to this or that local rebel group that in fact repeatedly kills not only these and those members of the Armed forces of the Philippines (AFP) but also the constituents of the civilian Philippine National Police.

While some decades have passed through with one “Peace Negotiation” after another held in foreign country supposedly with a third party intervention even, and while much monies have before changed hands for the sake of peace, what recently took place topped it all, so to speak. Subsequently, exposed to the knowledge of the general public: A secret trip abroad was made. A secret meeting took place. A secret amount of 5 million pesos passed from one hand to another. But lo and behold, some 19 soldiers were gunned down not much later. The secret was out, the atrocity was committed, and some kind of a battle cry “All Out Justice” was made supposedly to appease people. But then, to this date and time, the said newly invented battle cry sounds nice but remains enigmatic in its understanding and observance. Meantime, the killings go on simply as matter of fact while another “Peace Negotiation” is nonchalantly scheduled.

Something is definitely wrong with this picture: Talks go on. Money grants go on. Rebellion goes on. Killings go on. Hence: What happened to all the talks before? How were the then and now money grants spent? When will the rebellion stop—if ever? Or are these questions irrelevant even to the present administration that remains bound by a Constitution with maternal “Imprimatur”?

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Health

"The State shall adopt an integrated and comprehensive approach to health development which shall endeavor to make essential goods, health and other social services available to all the people at affordable cost. There shall be priority for the needs of the underprivileged sick, elderly, disabled, women and children. The State shall endeavor to provide free medical care to paupers." (Phil. Constitutions, Art. XIII, Sec. 11)

The mind is perplexed. The feeling is strange. Questions are understandable and in order. Is the above remarkable and impressive pronouncement really a provision of the Philippine Constitution written for and supposedly observed in this country? Is the same moving and defining statement actually a stipulation of the Fundamental Law of the Philippines? Or is it simply a misprint and wherefore merely a misplaced citation lifted from another Constitution of another nation in another continent?

"Integrated and comprehensive approach health development..." What in heavens does this mean in the context of Philippine realities? Where is it found in any part of the country? Judging from some two long years of incumbency of the one holding the highest executive office in the land, it is sad but true that it is rather hard to concede that the said public official knows the what and the how of a "development" that is not only "integrated" but also "comprehensive." The truth is that to this date, the people of the Philippines have yet to know and see an honest-to-goodness National Development Plan in place.

"Make essential goods, health and other social services available to all the people at affordable cost." Really? To this date and time, after no less than a quarter of a century from the promulgation of the Philippine Constitution, people are still waiting for the availability and affordability of the said goods and health services. The truth is exactly the opposite: Wallowing in poverty and immersed in want, millions of Filipinos are in fact deprived of such goods and services. It is however admittedly the opposite for those chosen few connected with Malacañang one way or another.

"Priority for the needs of the underprivileged, sick," etc., etc. Wow! This is called dreaming while wide awake. This is a resolve in Cloud 6. This is supposedly constitutional provision for the common good and social welfare of the People of the Philippines that sounds intended for and verified among people in other parts of the world.

Lo and behold, the Malacañang over-all response to the above cited composite constitutional provision is plain and simple: Get rid of Filipinos through the RH Bill! How convenient! How gross!

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There was the bloody Mendiola Massacre. There were the bitter strikes of the farmers staged in the Hacienda. There were the gross killings in Tarlac intimately connected with the same Hacienda—inclusive of the murder of a good and kind Aglipayan Bishop simply showing concern and extending assistance to the aggrieved farmers. One big piece of land owned by one big dynasty causative of one big long standing social problem in the country—this is the Hacienda Luisita.

"SC junk Luisita stock option deal"—so read the headline of a national broadsheet dated 24 November 2011. This was even followed with the news that no less than 14 Justices unanimously agreed to a "total distribution of land." This is the stark reversal of the maneuvering of a long previous government that supposedly had agrarian reform as the centerpiece of its avowed socio-economic program. But specifically in the case of Hacienda Luisita, instead of parting with the land in favor of the farmers, some kind of a stock distribution was ingeniously conceived and implemented.

Question: With the decision of the Supreme Court, is justice finally achieved in conjunction with the crimes generated by the Hacienda Luisita phenomenon? Answer: No. Reason: The judgment does not resurrect the lives lost in the above-said massacre and other killings, nor does it compensate those who lost their loved ones. Much less does it administer justice upon those responsible for the crimes. This notable criminal issue seems to have gone into complete oblivion.

Question: With the decision of the Supreme Court, is the Hacienda Luisita fiasco resolved? Answer: No. Reason: All the government agencies that are supposed to execute the judgment are under the sovereign rule of a Chief Executive that precisely belongs to the wealth and powerful clan behind the Hacienda. Furthermore, it is not a secret that there is some kind of a duel going on between the Executive Department and the Judiciary. This cannot but have a bearing on what the Department would do with the decision.

Question: With the decision of the Supreme Court, at what monetary cost to the farmers will the land be distributed to them? Would it be at the same cost price when the Hacienda was purchased from Tabacalera—as precisely agreed upon in its sale? Answer: Who knows? Question: Where did the financing of the business hub of the Hacienda really came from? Answer: Investigate. Question: Where did the financing of the piling of that tall and long barrier to protect the Hacienda from lahar really came from? Answer: Inquire.

There are people who say that the Hacienda Luisita is some kind of a "curse" to everybody concerned—farmers and owners alike. While this may not be exactly true, it would be however pretty hard to say that it is a "blessing" to the farmers in general. But to the Hacienda majority owners, it has been and it still is!
A Samurai and a Zen Master

A samurai, a very proud warrior, came to see a Zen Master one day. The samurai was very famous, but looking at the beauty of the Master and the Grace of the moment, he suddenly felt inferior.

He said to the Master, "Why am I feeling inferior? Just a moment ago everything was okay. As I entered your court suddenly I felt inferior. I have never felt like that before. I have faced death many times, and I have never felt any fear — why am I now feeling frightened?"

The Master said, "Wait. When everyone else has gone, I will answer."

People continued the whole day to come and see the Master, and the samurai was getting more and more tired waiting. By evening the room was empty, and the samurai said, "Now, can you answer me?"

The Master said, "Come outside." It was a bright night; the moon was just rising on the horizon. And he said, "Look at these trees. This tree is high in the sky and this small one beside it. They both have existed beside my window for years, and there has never been any problem. The smaller tree has never said to the big tree, 'Why do I feel inferior before you?' This tree is small, and that tree is big — why have I never heard a whisper of it?"

The samurai said, "Because they can't compare."

The Master replied, "Then you need not ask me. You know the answer."

During a momentous battle, a Japanese general decided to attack even though his army was greatly outnumbered. He was confident they would win, but his men were filled with doubt.

On the way to the battle, they stopped at a religious shrine. After praying with the men, the general took out a coin and said, "I shall now toss this coin. If it is heads, we shall win. If it is tails we shall lose."

"Destiny will now reveal itself."

He threw the coin into the air and all watched intently as it landed. It was heads. The soldiers were so overjoyed and filled with confidence that they vigorously attacked the enemy and were victorious.

After the battle, a lieutenant remarked to the general, "No one can change destiny."

"Quite right," the general replied as he showed the lieutenant the coin, which had heads on both sides.

Rabbi Moshe took a trip to a strange land. He took a donkey, a rooster, and a lamp. Since he was a Jew, he was refused hospitality in the village inns, so he decided to sleep in the woods.

He lit his lamp to study the holy books before going to sleep, but a fierce wind came up, knocking over the lamp and breaking it. The rabbi decided to turn in, saying, "All that God does, he does well."

During the night some wild animals came along and drove away the rooster and thieves stole the donkey. Moshe woke up, saw the loss, but still proclaimed easily, "All that God does, he does well.

The rabbi then went back to the village where he was refused lodging, only to learn that enemy soldiers had invaded it during the night and killed all the inhabitants. He also learned that these soldiers had traveled through the same part of the woods where he lay asleep. Had his lamp not been broken he would have been discovered. Had not the rooster been chased, it would have crowed, giving him away. Had not the donkey been stolen, it would have brayed.

So once more Rabbi Moshe declared, "All that God does, he does well!"
There be dragons is the story of London-based investigative journalist Robert Torres (Dougray Scott), who visits Spain to research a book about Josemaría Escrivá (Charlie Cox), the controversial founder of Opus Dei. But, Robert hits a wall, both professionally and personally, when his most promising source—his own father, Manolo Torres (Wes Bentley)—turns out to be his least cooperative one. Robert begins to unearth his father’s toxic secrets when he learns that Manolo was not only born in the same Spanish town as Josemaría, but that they were childhood friends and attended the same seminary. The two men take radically different paths in life, with Josemaría dedicating his life to his faith while Manolo is swept into the brutal and tumultuous Spanish Civil War. Manolo descends into a dangerous and jealous obsession when the beautiful Hungarian revolutionary Ildiko (Olga Kurylenko) doesn’t return his affections and instead gives herself to the courageous military leader, Oriol (Rodrigo Santoro). As Robert continues to unearth the secrets of Josemaría’s life and Manolo’s mysterious anger, their overlapping journeys are revealed with the truths and sorrows of their past choices, which compels Manolo to confront his own secret with one last opportunity of forgiveness.

With such a star-studded cast and crew, there is no reason There be dragons cannot pull off a memorable film. It is written and directed by two-time Academy Award-nominee Roland Joffé (The Mission, The Killing Fields, City of Joy) and stars Charlie Cox (Stardust, Casanova), Wes Bentley (American Beauty, Ghost Rider), Olga Kurylenko (Quantum of Solace, Max Payne), Emmy Award-winning actor Derek Jacobi (Gladiator, The Golden Compass), Dougray Scott (Mission Impossible II, Ever After) and Rodrigo Santoro (300, Che). Its art director is Academy Award-winner Eugenio Zanetti (Restoration, What Dreams May Come), its costume designer is Academy Award®-winner Yvonne Blake (What Dreams May Come), and its makeup designer is Academy Award-winner Michele Burke (Quest for Fire, Dracula). It is superbly edited by no less than Academy Award-nominee Richard Nord (The Fugitive), and photo-directed by Gabriel Beristain (Caravaggio). Whew!

In case you are wondering if this is another kung fu movie, take heart. The title There be dragons is borrowed from the words supposedly found on medieval maps indicating unexplored territory, Hic sunt dracones, which refers to the experiences in life which cause people to suffer and to react in different ways. Only by acknowledging and dealing with those “dragons”, director Joffé suggests, can we escape the cycle of vengeance and dehumanization which so marked the twentieth century and still marks today’s world. Says Joffé: “I think that’s what Josemaría was teaching, again and again, to people going through anguish experiences: to connect to the humanity not only of those who are suffering but also of those who are causing them to suffer. But just in case the mention of “Josemaría Escriva” scares you away, know that this is not a movie to proselytize its audience. It is a polished work of art, a professionally crafted epic tale of revolutionaries and saints in a time of civil war; a story of love and heroism amid jealousy, hatred and violence; and a heartbreaking drama about the power of forgiveness to break the chains of the past.
INDONESIA. Bali bans smoking in public places

Cigarette smoking in public places will be banned in Bali from early next year. In a new law, the local government has particularly singled out templates, transport facilities, schools, and health clinics among others. This also means that selling and advertising tobacco at schools will also be banned but tobacco companies will still be allowed to sponsor school activities.

MALAYSIA. Govt passes law banning street protests

Malaysia’s parliament has enacted a ban on street protests, defying hundreds of demonstrators who marched in the capital to denounce the legislation as a setback for civil liberties. The assembly law replaces legislation that required a police permit for public gatherings, but critics complain it contains a range of new restrictions including an outright ban on street marches.

THAILAND. Official withstands no-confidence vote

A senior Thai government minister has survived a vote of no-confidence over the government’s handling of the country’s worst floods in half a century. The Opposition alleged that Justice Minister, Pracha Promnok—who was responsible for overseeing the flood relief effort—was in charge of a corrupt operation. It also claimed his response to the flooding crisis had been inadequate. Pracha has defended his record and denied the corruption allegations.

CHINA. Wen jiabao vows to improve school bus safety

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao has vowed to improve safety and provide more school buses after the deaths of 19 children in a massively overcrowded bus sparked a public outcry. Wen’s remarks came after 19 children and two adults were killed last month in north China’s Gansu province when their overcrowded bus collided with a lorry. The nine-seater bus, from a local kindergarten, was carrying 64 passengers at the time of the wreck.

SRI LANKA. Storm kills 19, damages 5,700 homes

A storm packing heavy rains and gusty winds hit southern Sri Lanka late last month, claiming 19 lives and leaving 43 fishermen missing. Officials said more than 5,700 houses were also damaged forcing 53,000 people to vacate their homes following two days of heavy winds and rains. Authorities were looking for any survivors among fishermen who were reported missing.

BURMA. Govt to allow public protests

Four years after authorities cracked down on protestors during the ‘Saffron Revolution’ – in which hundreds of monks were arrested and more than 30 people killed, Burma’s parliament has passed a bill that allows peaceful public protest to be held. But protesters must avoid government buildings, schools, hospitals and embassies and they must inform authorities of their plans five days before holding protests. The bill needs to be signed by President Thein Sein to become law.

ISRAEL. ‘Lift travel ban on human rights defender’

Israeli authorities in the West Bank should lift the travel ban imposed since 2006 on West Bank resident Shawan Jabarin, the director of the Palestinian human rights group Al-Haq, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and B’Tselem said. Israeli authorities violated Jabarin’s due process rights in imposing the ban and have not produced any evidence that would justify continuing to restrict him from travel, the groups said.

NEPAL. No Amnesties for Wartime Abuses

Five years after the end of Nepal’s civil war, victims are still waiting for justice, Human Rights Watch and Advocacy Forum said in a joint report released Dec. 1. Alleged perpetrators have been appointed to senior government positions and sent abroad on United Nations peacekeeping missions without ever facing an independent and effective criminal investigation. “Giving amnesties to those responsible for serious abuses would only add insult to injury to victims of terrible crimes,” said Tejshree Thapa, South Asia researcher at HRW.

CAMBODIA. Govt urged to drop charges vs activists

Cambodian authorities must drop “politically-motivated” charges against four women involved in peaceful protests about the situation at Boeung Kak Lake in Phnom Penh, where almost 20,000 people have been forcibly evicted since 2008, Amnesty International said. Bo Chhorvy, Heng Mom, Kong Chantha and community leader Tep Vanny—were charged with “obstructing public officials” and “insult”—crimes that carry hefty fines and prison sentences of up to one year. “Cambodian authorities must stop targeting activists who are peacefully defending their communities’ rights,” said Sam Zarifi, director of AI Asia-Pacific Programme.

UAE. ‘End travesty of justice’ for 5 convicts over President insults

Amnesty International has urged the United Arab Emirates’ authorities to immediately release five activists following their conviction Nov. 27 by the Federal Supreme Court in Abu Dhabi for insulting UAE President and other officials. Nasser bin Ghaith, Fahad Salim Dalk, Hassan Ali al-Khamis and Ahmed Abdul Khaleq received two years’ imprisonment for criminal defamation, while Ahmed Mansoor was given three years. “The defamation charges the UAE5 faced are not internationally recognizable criminal offences and the trial process has been grossly flawed from the outset,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, AI Middle East Deputy Director.
Our sincerest wishes and prayers for a most meaningful Christmas and a peaceful New Year!

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