

## *The Church and the Catholic Vote*

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With the approaching national elections, the ever recurring question arises once more among the Catholic circles in this country: Is there a Catholic vote in the Philippines? The question is a very critical one, considering that the country is predominantly Catholic, and the Catholic vote can easily decide the country's political climate and, in fact, shape the nation's destiny.

But is there such a Catholic vote?

From our election experiences, Catholics have always voted as independent, free citizens who refuse to be pressured against their better judgement. There were attempts in the past from some ecclesiastical superiors to impose their high office upon the will of the Catholic voters in support of a particular candidate. And there could have been a number who heeded the appeal as a natural reaction as members of the Catholic community or in deference to their superiors. But the general voting trend, as indicated by the resounding defeat of favored candidate, showed that Catholics in the Philippines vote for other reasons than the will of the religious superiors.

There is not one single factor which can be pinpointed as the consideration for a Catholic voter's choice of his candidates, just as there is no such single factor as the consideration for any other free Filipino voter's choice. There are among them those who are partisan, there are the independent voters, and there may even be the voters by convenience or voters for material gains. In other words; they vote not as Catholics but as private individuals who cast their votes for their own reasons.

This does not, however, mean that Catholics cannot be solid in matters of election. As free and independent individuals, they can choose to unite and vote as a group by common agreement

or motivated by a common cause. Not necessarily as a solid Catholic vote but solid just the same. Soc Rodrigo, it may be remembered, first ascended to his political height through a strong vote from his Catholic followers, students for the most part. Manglapus also had a strong Catholic following in his senatorial candidacy, although he failed to garner sufficient Catholic support in his bid for the Presidency.

Now, what do all these mean? Simple. Give the Catholic a candidate who appeals to his better judgment and he will vote for that candidate. He is generally no different from any other voter. His final choice is swayed, not necessarily by his Catholic principles but by a subjective sense of values. Which is neither Catholic nor uncatholic but simply being a private individual.

In dealing with the Catholic voter, therefore, the Church, if it is to be an active force in the political life of the country, must delve deeper into the Catholic individuality than the mere presumption that Catholics are members of the fold who hear the master's voice. The Church must first develop the Catholic before it can generate the vote. There can never be a solid Catholic vote unless there is first a solid Catholicism in this country.

This problem is not only ticklish but outright confusing and complex and elusive if not altogether impossible. The present crisis in the faith has made matters worse. The very purpose for which the Vatican Council II was held, that is, to overhaul the Church to make it more responsive to the social needs of the times, has caused dissensions and misunderstandings on what the social role of the Church precisely is. To speak of a Catholic vote under these conditions within the Church can even be impertinent, if singled out as an isolated case to be resolved without relating it to other problems which must be resolved together with it. Problems in the Church are inextricably interrelated, the Church being a whole, a single society whose members are the concern of this whole and therefore whose problems are not isolated from the problems of the whole. An isolated question as, say, the Catholic vote must be viewed from the context of the life of the Church as a society, from the context of its principles and from the context of the very spirit which moves that Church in its existence and operations as a human society and as a mystical body. The process is a long, long one and there should be no mistaking about this . . . no lapsing into the traditional presumptions of the Church administrators about Catholics and catholicism.

The issue is more basic than it is generally believed to be. It involves the individual in his very being and in his conscience. This is what determines his better judgment. His way of voting depends on how his conscience is acculturated. If his conscience is not formed according to Catholic standards — upright conscience in the words of Pope Paul VI — it will be formed by other forces. A Catholic conscience for the Catholic voter and for the Catholic candidate for a public office is what it takes, basically, for the development of a solid Catholic vote. Without this, the vote of the Catholics will be guided by the situation in which they live, not as Catholics, but as any other member of society.

The priest is the personification of Church authority and is the central figure in any Catholic community. Upon him therefore devolves the role as the principal agent in the generation of the Catholic vote in his community. This is not a simple task. Here again, we return to the need for developing the Catholic as a voter as well as the Catholic as a candidate who deserves the trust of the voter. This is a task which cannot be accomplished from the ambo alone. The priest has to go beyond the altar rails down the aisle and beyond that aisle through the streets and alleys, through the slums and dead-ends, through villas and shanties, through cities and towns and barrios, to the home and the heart of the man. The home of a man is where he is, and his heart is where his conscience lies. He who penetrates this home and gives that man a sense of belongingness wins his heart and his conscience. Can the priest win that heart and that conscience for Christ, for Catholicism? Where the priest fails to do this, there is a need for the priest to reappraise himself, to ask whether he himself belongs.

When the youth of our present generation react against the Establishment, we can only trace the reactionism to a search for belongingness. There is a dissatisfaction with what is, which is an indication that they recognize some ideal concept of what should be. They find themselves in a situation to which they do not fit and therefore search for that something, that ideal concept, which for them does not exist, but which can and must exist if they have to create it themselves. So we have all around us a state of youth unrest.

Irresponsible aggressiveness, we say. Immature and immoral. Is it really irresponsible to react against irresponsibility? Immoral to react against immorality? What has our society done to give our youth — not only our youth but our citizenry in general — a sense of belongingness, a sense of individual and national dignity!

The social revolution of the youth is but a foreboding that the general citizenry is already in a state of internal rage, tempered perhaps by the maturity of the elders or the plain apathy of those who would rather witness social corruption than get involved.

Short of a violent, bloody reaction against established order, which is without order in the present state of things in this country, we need a solid vote to topple the immoral among those in power and set up a new structure if need be, or change leadership to a better one. This solid vote must come from a responsible sector. Unfortunately, this sector does not exist yet. It still has to be formed. Not by recruiting members to join a force ready to strike any time. By no means. This sector has to grow by a natural growth, by formation of the individual intellectually, emotionally and morally, by a process of growing up into maturity as human beings with right sense of values we call objective morality.

The Church that age-old institution that has led nations for centuries, that has itself experienced periods of corruption and eras of perfection, is the best agent of change in our present society that very badly needs a change. The Church has all the facilities, potentialities and experience to effect this change by developing its members in its true spirit of Christian charity and social maturity. These members, when developed into individuals with a collective conscience responsive to the objective needs of their society, and provided with prospective leaders who are equally formed with the same social conscience, will constitute the solid Catholic vote we have been searching for. Until then, we have to rest content with, or be resigned with discontent to, the present chaos gradually gnawing into the most intimate fibers of our social structure, and perish with it to give way to a new generation which perhaps knows better.