

PASTORAL LETTER

40th Anniversary AFP Chaplain Service

27 November 1977

Dearly beloved in our Military Vicariate:

May the Holy Trinity be with you all.

With the grace of Our Lord, We address you through this pastoral letter in anticipation of the 40th anniversary of the AFP Chaplain Service this coming November 27th.

The Filipino Tradition and Culture

A basic tenet of our Philippine Constitution is the recognition of man's need of God and dependence on Him. An example of this is the provision for a military chaplain service. The same provision is contained, and more expressly, in the National Defense Act of 1937.

Indeed, the framers of our Constitution were true to the richness of Filipino tradition and culture which through the centuries of the pre-colonial era had already been imbued with belief in God and divine worship.

Our tradition and culture as well as the written laws of our land are enough to convince us all, brethren in the Military Vicariate, that we can only be true to our respective roles in the AFP if our lives both private and public, reflect a living faith in God and are guided by its religious tenets.

However, the call to a God-centered Life does not originally stem from our laws our tradition and culture. The real and only source is God Himself Who in His infinite mercy gave us the gift of Faith. We are God-loving not because of our Filipino heritage, but because God inscribed in the tablet of our hearts the Two Great Commandments, the Love of God above all things and the love of our neighbor as our own selves. Independent of recognition of any nation or Government the truth will ever remain that God exists and rules the universe.

For a believer, faith is the full adherence of the mind to the truths revealed by God (Gen. 15:6), and full confidence in His saving

promises. Faith is man's free decision, but at the same time God's free gift (Jn. 6:44 & 65). Man is justified by faith, not by works (Rom. 4:2-6), but faith is also dead without actions (James 2:14 ff).

In the New Testament, faith above all is faith in Christ. Thus, the words of St. Paul: "... for those who have been called, whether they be Jews or Greeks, Christ is the power and wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 124).

An eloquent proof of the universality of man's religious belief is the fact that most countries, except those whose governments avowedly reject God, have a chaplain service in their Armed Forces. In fact, too, many countries, including those where Catholics are in the minority have a Military Vicariate as well.

The conclusion is clear that spiritual strength is a constitutive factor in the formation of a well-balanced and responsible man-in-uniform.

Four Centuries of Christianity

God, however, was not content to plant the "seed of the Word" in our land before the colonial times. By His special predilection, God rewarded the pristine faith of our forefathers with the "Good News" brought to our shores four centuries ago through the Church founded by His Only-begotten Son.

May God be praised that you early received the grace of the "Good News." Baptized in the Catholic Church, you embrace its teaching and continue to cherish its means of salvation, especially the sacraments. We are edified to note that you spare no effort to build "houses of worship" in most military installations, and in many more ways, show sincerity in trying to live up to the teachings of Our Lord.

As we approach, therefore, the 40th anniversary of the AFP Chaplain Service it will profit us all to evaluate how much we have benefited from it.

The Priesthood of Christ

Like all priests a Catholic military chaplain assumes the priesthood of Christ Himself by ordination, delegation and privilege. As such he is a bridge-builder between God and man, a reconciler between creature and Creator. He can only do such functions if he be called and deputed by God.

Unfortunately a stereotype image of a priest is of a man who celebrate Mass, administers the sacraments, and is called upon for invocations and house blessings. All such functions are of course, truly priestly and of great value. Stereotypes, nonetheless, are always inadequate. They can also mislead.

Christ was not a priest only at the Last Supper or when He was crucified on Mount Calvary. He was also a priest at the marriage in Cana and when He showed predilection for the children and the poor. He was as much a priest with Dives as with Lazarus. He was as much a priest with the wise men in the temple as with fishermen in Galilee.

Yes Christ was a priest to all men, of all walks of life, and on all occasions whenever and wherever his mission to make men love God above all things and their neighbor as their own selves was concerned.

Consequently, if we do not admit that our priests have such an all-embracing role, then neither do we accept the totality of Christ's priesthood. We cannot limit the role of a priest/chaplain to the altar and within the confines of a chapel. He is the bridge-builder between God and ourselves; and oftentimes this function is better realized outside the chapel and in our homes.

Similarly, on the part of laity the measure of the value of their church-going or the reception of the sacraments, of their pious devotions, and so on, is known from the manner in which these practices mold and affect their daily lives, their norms of conduct, the values that guide their family, community and official relationships.

We have so many stereotype priests and so many stereotype lay Catholics because so many are not full-fledged Catholics. We "compartmentalize" our hearts and minds, closing thereby a good portion of them to Christ.

The temptation, therefore, is great for the priest/chaplain to preach only that which pleases "the ears of the flesh," and for the faithful to welcome only a preaching of the Word that does not cut through the sanctuary of their worldly lives or interfere with their shady transactions. Thus the Word of God is manipulated, is silenced or sterilized.

Hence, the warning of Paul VI on the 5th anniversary of 2nd Vatican Council: "We must beware, in particular, lest an arbitrary selection should reduce God's design to the limits of our human

views and restrict the proclaiming of His work to what our ears like to hear, excluding on purely natural criteria what does not please contemporary taste". (Quinque Iam Anni)

Nowaday Preachers

There are two common types of a preacher nowadays.

On the one side, the Word of God is "doctored" or manipulated to suit certain socio-political ideologies. The Word becomes ancillary to the promotion of human rights and social justice, but the real vehicle is Marxist analysis and historical dialectics. The obsession is to establish a "new" theology a "new" popular Church, a "new" pastoral. And because they are an obstacle to all this, the "establishment" need be levelled, the "hierarchical Church" proletarianized.

The end-result is the confusion of the faithful and its division, the proliferation of "commando or guerilla groups" within the Church.

On the other side, there are preachers who allow themselves to be "gagged" by the first group, afraid that they be dubbed as "reactionaries" "pro-establishment," or conservatives. And not very different from these are priests who "soft pedal" the Word so as not to step on the toes of their listeners. They prefer silence in the face of injustices and violations of human rights, mistaking cowardice for prudence. This, too, does violence to the priesthood of Christ. This option, moreover, makes one lose in the long run the respect even of those whom we fear to offend.

The test of the objective quality of the ministry of the Word is twofold, namely: The first criterion is oneness with the teaching authority of the Church, with the Holy Father and the bishops in communion with him. No opinion of any number of theologians can outweigh the official teachings of the Pope. St. Paul stressed this when he wrote: "...if anyone preaches a version of the Good News different from the one you already heard, he is to be condemned" (Gal. 1:9). Without a visible supreme teaching authority religious indifference becomes inevitable. "The second criterion comes from a saying of Jesus: '...by their fruits you will know them' (Mk. 7:15-20)." Thus again Paul VI says: "In the clash of conflicting ideas, the greatest generosity runs the risk of going hand-in-hand with the most questionable statements... In the matter of discerning the word of faith, do we take sufficient note of the fruits that it brings? Could God be the source of a word that would make Christians lose the sense of evangelical self-denial or which

would proclaim justice while forgetting to be the herald of meekness mercy and purity? Could God be the source of a word which would set brothers against brothers?" (*Quinque Iam Anni*)

The Priesthood of the Laity

The foregoing criteria of course do not apply only to the ordained priests. Through baptism you, my brothers of the laity, belong to the "royal priesthood" and have received the mission to "preach the gospel to all nations" (Mark 16:15). There are Catholics who believe that as long as they hear Mass, receive the Sacraments, have their home blessed and start their gatherings with an invocation, they already qualify as "good Catholics". That is not enough. In accordance with our calling all of us are commissioned to proclaim the message of salvation. All of us can and should experience "as it is written," according to St. Paul, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news" (Rom. 10:15).

We exhort you, therefore, dear brethren, to know Christ first of all and His teachings. The best book for this is the Holy Scripture. Read the bible assiduously and with reflection. For how can you preach about Christ without knowing Him? Be preachers, above all, by your work and example, by your way of life and through constant prayers. Let your home and your family be your little "cathedral," the corner-stone of your God-given mission to evangelize at least the community you live in.

This was the purpose, and it will continue to be so, of the AFP Chaplain Service and of our Military Vicariate. The purpose, namely of providing for your moral formation and pastoral ministry. However humble, we are the bridge-builder between God and yourselves, a reconciler between Creator and creature.

"Many the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep . . . equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." (Heb. 13:20-21).

Given on the feast of Christ the King, 20 November 1977, at this office.

Your humble pastor

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