

THE PRIEST
AND THE GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEE

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The question of morality in the Philippine public service is one issue that has, time and again, been raised either as a political issue of aspiring politicians against an incumbent administration, or by certain quarters of our society with an honest concern for the future of this country. It is evident from the clamors for changes that everybody is aware of what is wrong with the system: graft and corruption perpetrated by people in the government at a very alarming rate.

Predictions have been voiced out that if nothing is done about the situation, drastic developments can be expected—a dominating infusion of a new ideology from outside or a take-over by a new and emergent leadership in some sort perhaps of a *coup d'etat*. In either case, it will mean violence and bloodshed.

Since the future of this country hinges on how we lay the groundwork for it at present, and since the kind of groundwork that we lay depends on the kind of people we are now, it is of primary importance that we take stock of ourselves and determine how well we fit into the scheme of the future we want for our national society. Are we capable, or are we misfits?

Many controls and instruments of accountability have been set up in our Constitution, our laws, our administrative issuances, to direct official and public behavior both of government people and the common citizens. We have a convenient system of mass communications supported by assurances of freedom of expression under democratic processes and guarantees. To top it all, we have the power to seat and unseat public officials by the power of the ballot.

And yet we see that public officials whose sense of moral values stink of the gutters persist in public office, and the citizens who in the final analysis are the bearers of the ignominy sit in resigned complacency unable to do anything about the situation. The more matured and responsible members of the country's framework do act to go after graft and corruption. Others have taken the role of barkers. Both types succeed for a while to create a ripple of scare. But the crooks are back in their trade when the scare is over, multiplying in number and increasing in activities.

Evidently, the present approach to the moral problems in government is taking a wrong direction. As controls, the means being applied to resolve the problems may be objective and good in themselves, but they are premature under the circumstances. They presume the preparedness of the individual and the society as a whole.

The problem is more basic than symptomatic manifestations. Curing the symptoms can give temporary relief at most. Until we learn to probe deeper and hit the problem at the root, the vicious cycle in the perpetration of graft and corruption will continue turning and swirling every bit of the country's fiber into an entangled mess from which we may never recover. We have a sick society: a sick government and a sick citizenry. Democratic processes are working towards the wrong direction, not because democracy is ineffective in itself but because our society has failed to grasp the real essence of democracy and to make it work for our advancement. Government administrators are too deeply engrossed in partisan politics and small group loyalties. The public apathy on the other hand and the selfish competition for survival work in conflict with the common good and turn the Filipino social and cultural values into instruments of abetting corruptive practices in government.

The Basic Problem

At the root of all the problems is the man himself. No amount of penal or corrective measures will prove effective unless the individual is receptive and prepared for the change. The Philippine public service is infested with morally corrupt officials and employees because environment has created them so, moulding their conscience in the pattern of situational values both in public office and in their private life. Traditional morality based on the objective precepts of the natural law has given way to the pressures and thinking of what is called modernity and the liberal concept of self assertion. And as the individual is thus formed, the community is similarly developed by mutual influence and togetherness in a common sanction of moral laxity. The consequent rampancy of immoral practices are mere manifestations of the basic corruption—the corruption of the individual conscience.

There is a need to redefine the role of reason and conscience in the life of the individual. There is a need to reappraise the concept of morality which now has been obscured by the attraction of materialistic convenience that goes with situationalism. The idea of God has become a fiction, or at best, a cultural antic preserved as a part of tradition rather than a way of life.

It is true that God can only be understood within the experiential limits of the human mind. So is morality understandable only within the limits of what is known by reason as right and grasped by conscience as good. But this does not mean that what is right and what is good are a matter of a purely individual and subjective judgment. Reason and conscience, by their very nature, search for standards higher than man's experience. To limit reason and conscience within the realm of experience would limit them to level of sensible faculties and thus destroy their dignity as the highest and most sublime faculties of man.

The ordinary government employee is capable of grasping this truth. Yet the failure to do just that is the basic cause of moral corruption in this country. For when the government employee starts believing that the law of the situation is the guiding factor in his life, he similarly starts trekking the road towards dissension with his fellow human beings.

The needs of different groups are different. Even the needs within one group alone vary with the times. Generally, the norm is what is convenient or expedient, that the situational standard is an excuse precisely for violating morality which it professes to uphold.

The Pastoral Role

In the program of enchancement in the government service, the parish priest is a central figure. It must be remembered that every government employee is first a member of his community. Catholic government employees are therefore also members of their respective parishes. And as there is no distinction between the individual as a government employee and the individual as a parishioner (except a logical and positional one), the parish priest can actually mould official behavior in government by developing the employee as an individual member as his parish. It only needs positive action geared towards constructive development of the individual. The government employee behaves in his government office according to how he is formed in his community. He brings to his office the morality of his community. And his community is identified with his parish.

The problem these days is the utter lack of pastoral care. Communities are influenced by almost all factors except the personal guidance of the parish priest. How many parishioners in this country, especially in the urban areas, know who their parish priest is. They come in personal contacts with their political leaders, their doctors, their lawyers, their teachers, their bill collectors and even the hoodlums in the area. But the parish priest keeps his distance within the sanctuary of the church and the rectory. There are a few, perhaps in small and remote parishes, where the priests can take some time out to see how their parishioners are faring.

It is of course to be recognized that the Philippines is suffering from lack of priests to do pastoral work. There is a shortage of vocations to the priesthood, and among those who pursue the vocation, only a small percentage finally get ordained. Consequently, the increase in number of priests is very much below the increase in parish populations. So that as community life becomes more complex and the things of

modernity distract people more and more from their spiritual growth, there are less and less priests by proportion to counteract the oncoming pressure of materialism by their pastoral ministry. And similarly, as the pastoral ministry becomes unable to cope with the situation, the people are more and more alienated from the parish priests and the ministry is rendered still less effective. The cycle goes on towards creating a growing distance between the people and their pastors. When the flock is too big for the shepherd to watch, ravening wolves feast on the flock. The government employee whose homebase is the parish has the most wolves going after his blood.

The situation is therefore one of lack of mutual understanding, lack of rapport between the parishioner-employees and the priest. As the parishioner-employees are not well grounded in their own spiritual homebase, they can hardly find spiritual growth elsewhere. This accounts, to a great extent, for the moral debasement in the public service. Against the environs of moral laxity and positive influence of immoral conduct, a government employee who is spiritually abandoned in his own parish can hardly have a moral foundation to stand on.

Experience has shown that the government's moral programs are ineffective. A government employee needs a foundation stronger than the onslaughts of immoralities which government programs aim to curb. Striking the moral evils at their symptoms is futile. The changes must be radical. The parish priest must enter the picture and work on the man, his basic nature as a human individual with a natural yearning for what is noble and dignified. The primary responsibility of exploiting this basic potential is incumbent on the parish priest. If the parish priest fails in this, it is hardly possible for others to succeed. Extra parochial measure may work to a certain degree and within a certain limit. An over all success on a continuing basis is possible only where the parish priest takes the initiative.