

# INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL ACTIVISM BY THE RELIGIOUS

**QUESTION:** In our monthly seminar for theology students we discussed extensively the priests' role in the re-structuring of society. The two documents of the recent synod of Bishops served as our guidelines. However, the *Statement of the Major Religious Superiors "on the role of the Religious Priests, Sisters and Brothers in the Philippines today"* was brought into the discussion. I am sending you a copy of the *Statement*. Not a few of the discussants unconditionally endorsed the *Statement*, and some of us did not find it acceptable. A cursory reading of the *Statement* will show you how widely it differs in language and content from the above-mentioned Synodal documents. We are earnestly soliciting your opinion on the matter. Both the *Statement* and the two Synodal documents are expressions of our Superiors. In case of real disagreement between the two, to which of them should we appeal for personal action?

A Religious Student

**ANSWER:** From the start we admit that an adequate answer to our Student may not be an easy one, since such vast matters as those implicated in this *Statement* cannot be treated in so short a space. So, we will try to single out its salient points in order to obtain a fair and succinct answer.

## 1. *Publicity given to this Statement*

The mimeographed copy from our Student is the same *Statement* of the Associations of Major Religious Superiors of Men and Women in the Philippines which appeared on page 11 of the Manila Times, January 1, 1972. Some observations might be in order on the very title and the signature of this *Statement*. On the other hand, the Associations of Religious Men and Women, if they are true to the rules on whose authority the very validity of their existence is based, should work separately. The rationale behind this regulation is self-evident to all who are familiar with the differences both in *character* and *training*

and in *their proper mission* within the Church. For this reason, we ask, why this rule, which is observed elsewhere, is not kept here in the Philippines? Thus, we find the *Statement* jointly signed and published by both religious men and women. One wonders at the total agreement, even as to the very words, of both Associations on matters so vast and so fundamental. One would surmise that the *Statement* was possibly the exclusive creation of religious men and then endorsed by the uniform, sweet 'Amen' of the Sisterly Choir.

Furthermore, how did it happen that a *Statement* intended to deal with the 'role' of the Religious, instead of being sent to its addressees was addressed that glaringly to the general public?

But these are only procedural matters which we prefer to leave as they are.

### 2. *More Important*

The real objection which makes the *Statement* not only controversial, but, in our opinion, even unchristian, comes from its contents. Indeed, from title to end the *Statement* sounds more of a revolutionary manifesto than a document from ecclesiastics. Even the very title is misleading, since it attempts to assign 'the role' of the Religious Orders and Congregations *in the Philippines today* which in no way can coincide with the end and aim of Religious Entities as approved by the Church.

In truth, as all Catholics know, the role of the various Religious Orders is well defined in their specific constitutions as approved by the Holy See, and no constitution of any Order has ever been accepted by the Church for the purpose claimed by the *Statement*. On the other hand, the role of the Religious 'in the Philippines today' is exactly the same role yesterday and tomorrow, the very same role of all religious in all parts of the world. Yet, the title is in itself misleading and the ordinary reader may think that something is different 'today' and 'in the Philippines'.

Now, the role of all religious Orders is essentially a religious and sacred one. Each one of the Congregations has its own peculiar constitution towards the fulfilment of its sacred aim, but all are equally subject, in the pursuit of their works of teaching and charity, to the directives of the Pope and to the local bishop in each one of the dioceses. No other role can be conceived in this field without a radical adulteration of the religious state.

### 3. *A Limitation*

Though the *Statement* forms a coherent whole and while its tone is equally inflammatory, much as we would like to reproduce it in full,

space allows us to reproduce only in part. This limitation, however, does not prejudice the objectivity of our analysis, since the *Statement* having been published in one of our prominent dailies is readily available to the public.

*Part of the Statement:*

1. We, the Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines, recognize the aspirations of our people to be liberated from the *oppressive factors present in our social institutions and structures*. We see that the *role of the Church in the Philippines today* is to intensify every effort to awaken the consciousness of all our people to a full realization of their dignity and equality as persons. In particular we affirm this need in regard to the poor and underprivileged, that they may be aroused to exercise their right as human beings to participate in the decisions that affect their lives as individuals in their destiny as a people. This luminous goal summons *all of us to participate in the radical restructuring of the present unjust social order in our country*. The accomplishment of this drastic but necessary social changes will undoubtedly *cause tensions, confusion and anguish*, but this agonizing struggle may well be *the only way by which chaos and violent revolution can be prevented*.
2. . . . To be the Church of the poor imposes on us the obligation of an honest examination of conscience as to our own living witness of the gospel . . . Are we ourselves actually *collaborating with the very structures of wealth and security that form the pattern of oppression?*
3. The present instance of our history demands that *we religious work with rather than for our people . . .*

With such a mixture of platitudes and generalizations we underscored the above lines to call the attention of the non-conversant reader.

4. *Some remarks about this text*

Apart from the language, which we consider improper for religious men and women, we find the *Statement* utterly untenable.

First and salient is the wide generalization. Too general to be true, of course. Nothing in the social order of our country, political, social, economic, military, educational, etc., etc. has been spared. Is it even thinkable that, as stated "present in our social institutions and structures" "oppressive factors" would have so thoroughly crept that no healthy part could have been left? Because the "oppressive factors" are said to have gone that far that no redeeming elements could have remained to the point that all religious, "all of us" are summoned "to

participate in the radical restructuring of the present unjust social order of our country". Thus, with one mighty stroke of its self-appointment this *Statement* has condemned the whole social order in the Philippines and has appointed its own authors the builders and the re-constructors of a *new order*.

In vain will the reader try to divine *what in particular* are the supposed wrongs, and *what kind of new order* will the new builders establish for our redemption. This, apparently, is the business of the *Statement's* wisdom which it keeps carefully for its noble self.

In vain too will the reader look for any indication of *the means* which the religious might use in the performance of their "role". The public, we think, has the right to know in advance a definition both of the *real ills* and of *the means* to be used to combat them. Or does the *Statement* subscribe to the famous *Do evil as a means to good, Rom. 7:8?* Or perhaps the *Statement* imposes on us all a conduct inconceivable even to men in primitive history: "*are you really going to destroy the just man with the sinner?*" *Gen. 18:23.*

Actually, with such a flat condemnation, without qualification of any sort, even the casual reader may wonder if such a bleak picture really mirrors the Philippines today. Nobody will, of course, ignore, or minimize, the actual ills of our society today. *But this oversimplification and the sloganeering language adopted by this Statement is liable to add to the ills and to help those who advocate for social reform from an angle totally different from that of the Church.*

### 5. *Is such procedure Christian?*

Evidently, nothing can be truly Christian which is false or unethical. Fortunately, as a sure guideline, we have the normative Word and conduct of the Lord Jesus and His Apostles, and if their message would appear a bit stale for some religious taste *today*, in the midst of the actual turmoil, we have the definite teaching of the Pope and that of the Synod of Bishops for the comfort of those of us who still care for *the Church's magisterium*.

#### A. *The Lord Jesus*

Our Student-questioner is invited to go through every page of the New Testament. In vain will he search for a word or for one iota that may lend the least support towards any elimination of the order of society or of its structures. The Lord Himself accepted the established order to the point of acknowledging the authority of the man who was

abusing his authority in the greatest crime of all time (*John, 19:11*). No. Nothing was wrong with authority, nor with the establishment. The wrongs came from the abuse therein, by persons who should not abuse their position.

St. Paul too was most specific about the acceptance imposed on all Christians of the establishment and its structures (*Rom. 13:1, ff.*) And all know well the kind of establishment and the kind of structures prevalent in the Roman world, from the *slavery of the masses* to all sorts of oppression from the *few 'haves'*. Significant is the teaching of that touching short Letter to Philemon, and the acceptance of St. Paul of the duty of satisfaction incurred by a slave whom the Lord had already made free (*Philem. 7-8*).

Evidently, the Lord's approach to the social ills was a bit different from that of the *Statement*. True to His mission of Redeemer He went to the root of all ills, *Sin. Personal and communitarian sin*. And the remedy applied by Him was "*grace and truth*", *John, 1:14*. Radical as the sources of social wrongs were, this remedy, grace and truth, was to reach even greater boundaries that could have ever been imagined by any social reformer. Sensitive as no other social reformer to men's need of *material bread*, but conscious of all implications in human complexity, He saw that on bread alone no man could live, (*Matth. 4:4*). So He offered to all the real road to total beatitude, (*Math. 5:1, ff.*) which could be the lot even of those to whom the superabundance of bread (read *land-titles, housing, health service, and the rest*) would never be able to spell happiness. And here is the mystery of Jesus' paradox, something conspicuously missed by the authors of this *Statement*. Beginning with His apostles, men took literally to His "truth" and, through His "grace", though gradually they changed their own minds and hearts. Then, the minds and hearts of this new breed, through truth and grace, (read *preaching and works of charity*) were able to change oppressive structures and society itself. Francis of Assisi and John Bosco, two men alone among hundred thousands, were able to bring about into society more *genuine* reform than all social reformers both in the capitalistic and in the communist camps ever did.

### B. *The Holy Father*

To the famous encyclicals of his predecessors and his own, our Holy Father added his Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens*. The impact of this Letter can be read in the Synodal Documents mentioned above. Objectivity and serenity in language and content run through these beautiful pages. No ill of society is missed or dissimulated. Serenity again is the note when pointing to the remedies. *No advocacy towards any upheaval*

of social institutions and structures can be read there, much less any self-attribution of competence towards any radical restructuring of the social order in any nation. The same attitude characterizes the two Documents of the Synod of Bishops. Perhaps some short quotations may help the reader to form his own opinion on the matter.

Writes the Holy Father:

1. We believe that the solution for this deplorable conditions, deplorable in certain areas, is *neither reactionary revolution nor recourse to violence*. . . . We say it on the strength of Our pledge with Christ. . . . (At the General Audience, Aug. 21, 1968. Cfr. *The Pope Speaks Magazine*, 1968, pag. 321).

1. We do not have, as you know, direct competence in temporal affairs; nor do We have means or authority to make a practical intervention in the question. (To 300000 'campesinos' at Bogota. *T.P.S.*, 1968, p. 325).

3. The Church agrees to recognize the world as such — that is, free, autonomous, sovereign, and in a certain sense, self-sufficient. . . . (To the General Audience, April 23, 1969. Cfr. *T.P.S.*, 1969, pag. 134).

4. We do not belong to this international organization; We are unacquainted with the specific questions which have their study offices and discussion rooms here, and Our spiritual mission is not intended to intervene in matters outside its proper domain. . . . Without any particular competence in the technical discussions on the defence and promotion of human work, We are nevertheless no stranger to this great cause of labor. . . . (To Members of I.L.O., at Geneva, June 10, 1969, cfr. *T.P.S.* op. cit., pag. 137-138).

5. In the realm of social realities, the Church has always wanted to exercise a twofold function: first, to enlighten men so as to help them find the truth and a sure pathway amid the different doctrines to which they are attracted; and second, to devote her efforts to spreading the power of the Gospel while showing concern for effective service to men. (Octagesima Adversus, n. 48, cfr. *T.P.S.*, 1971, pag. 161-162).

### C. From the Synod of Bishops

Though for all who listen to the Vicar of Christ as the most authoritative voice in the Church's magisterium the above quotations might be sufficient, yet, a few words from the world episcopate might be helpful too.

1. To bishops and, in cases foreseen by the law, to episcopal conferences is committed the role of authentically promoting, in accordance with the norms given by the Holy See, *pastoral activity and liturgical renewal*. . . .

2. In order to determine in *concrete circumstances* whether secular activity is in accord with the priestly ministry, inquiry should be made . . . *This is to be judged by the local bishop with his presbyterium*, and if necessary in consultation with the episcopal conference. When activities of this sort, which *ordinarily pertain to the laity*, . . .

3. But since political options are by nature contingent and never in an entirely adequate and perennial way interpret the Gospel, *the priest, who is the witness of the things to come, must keep a certain distance from any political office or involvement. . . the priest can sometimes be obliged to abstain from the exercise of his own right in this matter.*

(Document: *The Ministerial Priesthood*. Kindly read these paragraphs in full in the *Boletin Eclesiastico de Filipinas*, Jan. 1972, pag. 69-71).

4. *And finally.* Unless the Christian message of love and justice shows its effectiveness through action in the cause of justice in the world, it will only with difficulty gain credibility with the men of our times. . . . *Of itself it does not belong to the Church, in so far as she is a religious and hierarchical community, to offer concrete solutions in the social, economic and political spheres for justice in the world. Her Mission involves defending and promoting the dignity and fundamental rights of the human person. . .*

. . . *The liturgy, which we preside over and which is the heart of the Church's life, can greatly serve education for justice. . . . The practice of penance should emphasize the social dimension of sin and of the sacrament. (The Document: Justice in the World, cfr. Boletin Eclesiastico de Filipinas, February, 1972, pp. 113 & 117).*

Here our Student is invited to see how the diametrically opposite doctrines of the Church and the Lord Jesus would meet with blatant pronouncement of this *Statement*.

#### 6. *Technical incompetence*

If moving in their own waters the authors of the *Statement* have fared that badly, what shall we say of their competence, if, as the case is, the objectives of their declaration is definitely out of their professional field? For, for anyone with a bit of discretion the social order and the social structures of any given country, if they are to be fairly treated, do require a professional training proper to the host of subjects which take the long-year courses in Colleges and Universities and the lifetime of scholars and statesmen. The field is so vast indeed that for any elementary honest discernment of what is right and what is wrong, of what is convenient and what is detrimental as regard social theory and social action in any given circumstances, one may well require a comprehensive

knowledge of so many sciences, social, political, ethical, commercial, mercantile, industrial, agricultural, military, both in a national and international aspect. Are we going to acknowledge such technical competence in the authors of this *Statement*? Even if we, to be generous, admit that the Priest-Superiors, on account of the side-subjects along their long philosophical and theological courses may possess an elementary knowledge in those fields, yet, what scientific support may their *Statement* obtain from the unison acclamation of the virginal Choir?

### CONCLUSION

If there has been too much prolixity in our observations, that will be compensated for by the brevity of our answer. Our questioner, himself, a Student of theology, may formulate his own answer. If he would only hold on to the divine teaching authority of Popes and Bishops as a dogma of faith from Pentecost to the Dogmatic Constitution *On the Church* of the Second Vatican Council, the answer becomes as clear as fountain water. And that applies not only for Religious Students, of course, but mainly for their Superiors. And the higher the Superiors are the more they are expected to hold on fast to the teaching of the Church's magisterium.

QUINTIN MA. GARCIA, O.P.

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ,

*(Gaudium et Spes, no. 1)*