

Storm Clouds Over Luzon

by LEON GARCIA



"Go to the workingman! Go to the poor!"

Pope Pius XI in a moment of inspiration struck upon this great slogan for our troubled times.

If the storm clouds over Luzon soon swamp our seemingly peaceful countryside, it will be because the alleged champions of the common man refused to listen to the Pope of the Workingman. No one cared to go to the Filipino peasant, no one cared to go to the poor.

Patience, I believe, and not hospitality is the most remarkable trait of the Filipino *kasama*. Other men in his shoes — if he has any — would have raised a battle cry long ago. But not the Filipino farmer.

Three hundred years of unquestioning obedience have instilled in his soul a callousness for endurance equalled only by his changeless friend

— the carabao. Even now with his back to the wall, he has not taken to the bolo. Patient, he hopes against slipping hope that somehow he would stumble upon a solution to his hopeless life.

But how long will this patience last?

Already it is being agitated, set afire. When the last drops shall have been consumed, will the lamp be re-filled?

Once upon a time the *kasama* trusted the hacendero. The hacendero enslaved him. He turned to the churchmen. The churchmen did not seem interested. He went to the government. The government exasperated him. He gave himself to the hands of labor leaders. Labor leaders cheated him.

Today the *kasama* is alone. He is friendless. The Huks and the PCs claim to defend him, one from the

other. Both abuse him most unjustly. The kasoma is confused. He no longer recognizes his friends and his enemies.

The kasoma is living on money borrowed at rates of interest ranging from 30% with mortgage to 900 per cent! Ordinary rates are from 200 to 500% without mortgage! He eats boiled rice twice a day, drinks plenty of water, often doesn't own the shirt on his back.

How long will his patience last?

As long as loan sharks continue to lend him even without visible hope of payment, as long as borrowed boiled rice keeps his stomach warm, he will sit still and sullenly watch the cogon grass cover his fields.

But when that stomach goes empty — heaven help the Philippines! Whoever heard of empty stomachs going hand in hand with the virtue of patience!

But certainly this picture is too grim, too foreign to reality.

Let us see.

In a certain town in Nueva Ecija, some 4,000 peasants — members of some 800 families — have been living in dependence for the last three decades upon four or five big, fat hacenderos who own the land they till. They have inherited their tenancy from their fathers' fathers together with the debts accrued to the land.

Today these peasants have left their farms for the towns. President Quirino tells them in the papers that

they need not worry, that they should go back to the fields, that everything is under control.

But President Quirino has been living in Baguio behind walls and walls of trusted guards prepared to defend to death his property and his life. The peasants live in the wide open fields — the battlefields — with nothing and no one to defend their one and only property — their lives.

They used to raise hogs and chickens, to plant vegetables and pick snails in these fields. But when the Huks came, they had to surrender these to the champions of the peasants. Often the PCs, representatives of the law that they are, acted no better. Hence the poor seek refuge in the towns.

Such senseless hurrying from barrio to town and vice versa has been going on since the sleek-eyed invaders set foot on Philippine soil. Will it ever end? And while it lasts, what will the tenants live on?

There is one man who has always been a helper in need and a friend in deed (?) at such times — the loan shark! The tenants had to live. They didn't mind being bitten off by loan sharks at the rate of 30% with mortgage to 900 per cent interest. Ordinarily, of course, only from 200 to 500 per cent without mortgage!

After the war the Philippine National Bank gave out crop loans to the tenants. However, the bad elements, whom the government con-

not seem to control, told them the loans were gratuitous handouts. They were donations on which the poor peasants could start afresh. Elections were coming; the administration was generous.

A few months after elections, the peasants were hounded by PNB bill collectors in their most secret recesses!

Last year another election was in the offing. President Quirino and his liberal administration handed out loans thru the PACSA. Each family filed an application for seedling loans at the rate of ₱7.50 per sack of seedlings. The PACSA operated in Cabanatuan.

The tenants had to travel all the way from their barrios to the capital and live there for the duration of the bargaining and the red tape. By the time they returned to the barrios, they had spent half the loans on food, transportation, and bribery on government employees! Apparently the administration reeked with graft and corruption thru and thru.

The tenants returned to their feathered friend — the loan shark. He had grown rich and fat. He smoked big fat cigars and rode in a fast convertible. He had built a bungalow in Quezon city, brought his family to Manila and sent his children to exclusive Catholic schools!

Once again the government sent men thru the National Cooperative Association of the Philippines. These learned men stormed the towns giv-

ing lectures and demonstrations. They made a lot of talk about credit unions and cooperative stores. But they had no capital. Neither had the tenants.

And so the tenants are living on borrowed money. Each year finds them buried deeper and deeper in debts, and the loan sharks less and less open handed. The tenants owe their hacenderos, the Philippine National Bank, the PACSA, and the loan sharks. For them it has always been a losing battle.

According to Catholic ethics and common sense, the workingman should have, in exchange for his work, enough to feed, clothe, shelter his family decently, send his children to school and still have enough for time of sickness and old age.

The Filipino kasama is alien to all this. He doesn't think of the morrow, doesn't see beyond the hour. His all time problem is: Where shall I borrow the next ganta of rice? Where shall I get the next lugao? In the darkness of his despair, he either goes to the loan shark, or learns to shoot and joins the Huks.

The government has a lot to do for the tiller of the soil, the backbone of the nation. Its promises of peace and order must first become reality. Then it should extend all help to the tenant by way of instructions and means of modern agricultural practices.

The government is in the best

PRAYER FOR THE FOURTH ESTATE

Addressed to St. Francis de Sales, patron of newspapermen, the following prayer unearthed by a parish priest, who is credited with having a sympathetic understanding of the newspaper scribe, is printed in the *Journal of the British Institute of Journalists*. Clip it and send it to a newspaperman-friend.

St. Francis, dear patron of a harrowed tribe, grant us thy protection. Bestow on us, thy servants, a little more of thy critical spirit, and a little less on our readers; confer on our subscribers the grace of light in acknowledging our merits; and the grace of promptitude in paying our bills. Make them less partial to compliments, more callous to rebuke, less critical of misprints. Give us beautiful thoughts, brave thoughts, so that we, thy children, may have the courage to write as we think and our readers the docility to think as we write. Then shall we, thy faithful servants, resting on thy protection, fight thy battles with joyful hearts, drive the wolf from the door, the devil from the fold, and meet thee in everlasting peace. Amen.

position to help him. It can lend him capital, if it wants to. The problem is to see to it that the money gets into the tenant's hand whole. It's time President Quirino seriously stepped in to end graft and corruption in the administration. Chino turned red for no other reason.

In an effort to secure lands for hundreds of its families, the De Gasperi government in Italy is currently sponsoring a four-point program. These are: 1. protection of tenants in the tenure of their farms against unilateral action by owners; 2. improved conditions for farm workers by giving them an interest in the land through profit-sharing and some degree of management control; 3. reclamation of some undeveloped lands, and 4. the limitation of individual holdings on land.

Can't our government plan and execute a similar or even better program of action? It can, if it wants to.

The Church too can help the tenant tremendously. She can help him fight against his ignorance, his vices and oppressors. Priests can help tenant-parishioners thru credit unions, cooperative systems, collective bargaining and all the economic and moral theories they learned in the Seminary. It's also time they put these theories into practice.

But let's not talk much. The thing is somebody's got to "Go to the Filipino peasant!" before it is too late — even for talk!