

DOCTRINAL SECTION

THE CLERGY IN SOCIAL AWARENESS AND ACTION

● VERY REV. JESUS DIAZ, O.P.
UST Rector Magnificus

How can the clergy apply their fervor, their zeal, and intelligence to the social problems of an underdeveloped economy like the Philippines? To what extent should their participation be in the social amelioration of the people? Would this not force the priest into assuming a role for which he may not be totally prepared? And how does specialization in ecclesiastical studies, particularly theology, come into play in all of these questions?

The vast lands and the teeming populations which make up Asia are today in one of the most turbulent periods of the history of mankind. Europe does not seem to be the immediate concern of mankind today or tomorrow. The massiveness and potential of Africa, on the other hand, appear to be decades away. It is here in Asia, where both East and West—and the complex ideologies they represent—will come to terms. It is here, in this part of the globe, where it will be determined whether the world will move on. Or end in cataclysmic war.

In what other part of the world will one find such challenges to all kinds of people, including priests? Where else but here in the Philippines, will one find a more unique and meaningful stage for the social aspects of priestly supernatural works?

In proposing to examine the social aspects of priestly work today, would this be treading on strange and forbidden grounds? It would not.

In fact history will bear out that this is just proposing a return to the fundamentals of a priestly existence—and that is to serve—to serve God and society in the best way he can. And the best way he can serve is to be relevant, to be pertinent, to be at the heart of things in the milieu in which he finds himself.

Consider the first missionaries to the Philippines. God certainly did favor them with one of the world's most successful missions in Christianity. But the missionaries also took it upon themselves to become an integral part of the society of their times. Consciously or unconsciously, they introduced the word of God to the pagans of these islands through an intensive socio-economic approach.

The first missionaries were not only evangelizers but also civilizers. They built the towns and cities of the country. They constructed roads, bridges, forts and irrigation dams. They introduced various industries like silk raising, tile manufacturing, iron and copper mining, wheat farming, brick production and printing.

Most of the vegetables and fruits that are found in the Philippines today were introduced by the missionaries—Indian corn, tobacco, cotton, cacao, camote, egg-plant, papaya, pineapple, tomato, peanut, squash and cassava. Add to these the domesticated animals like cows, horses, pigeons, and other species of fowls and animals.

It is not necessary to dwell in detail on the tremendous contribution of the early priests to the educational achievements of the Filipino people. Santo Tomas University, for instance, is proud to be part of this contribution and is today observing her 357th year of service to the Filipino youth.

Priests must recapture that zealotry, that sincerity, that total perspective pertinent and valuable to the Filipino people which earlier priests demonstrated so effectively during the early years of Christianization in these islands. They will take the right direction if they start this Renaissance today.

Why Renaissance? Because earlier brothers and priests were inflexible advocates of social work in this society. They were hospital

builders and founders of asylums and orphanages. Some of the colleges founded by the missionaries also served as havens for the homeless and orphan.

Is today any different from earlier times? Can a priest be less zealous in social work than his predecessors?

As a matter of fact, the times today are more urgent and crucial. The Philippines is burdened with supporting 34 and a half million Filipinos with a very slow Gross National Product. And still, each year, the population growth continues to become bigger and bigger. There is a vast army of young people — young people who are restless, dissatisfied with the performance of their elders, eager for success, pining for material comfort. The economic and social dislocations of the poor are at more dangerous levels since World War II. The symptoms of this socio-economic and moral breakdown are evident in the daily newspaper headlines: the Huk insurgency, crimes against property and persons, deficiencies in the governmental and judicial machinery, and the ever-growing encroachment of communism in the rural areas of this country, where live 75 per cent of the population. Those who have seen Cuba and Indonesia with their very own eyes are positive in stating that right now, at this very hour, the very same conditions which brought the revolutions in Cuba and Indonesia are rearing their ugly heads in the Philippines today.

Can Priests engage in social action to a larger extent than they have in the past? In what specific areas can they enter? How can they bring their theological excellence into the picture?

They must enlarge their social action programs. They must bring God to the barrios and the cities. They must be aware of the underdeveloped conditions of Philippine society. The poor, the illiterate, the orphaned, the lame, the sick, the malcontents in the barrios, the farms, the fishing villages—these deserve greater attention now, because it is in these elements where the first seeds of violent revolution are first planted.

It is hard to say exactly how this can be done. Some programs that are going on now at Santo Tomas University may serve to indicate the fields open to a priest in his particular spheres of influences.

There is the Medical Missions. This is a team of doctors, nurses, psychologists, sociologists, faculty-student groups, and priests who visit rural folks and slum areas in the cities. It has gone to every major province today and has attended to more than 1,000 cases. Sapang Palay village is unofficially an "adopted baby" of the missions.

There is the domiciliary service of the Department of Preventive and Social Medicine. Its volunteer-workers and nurses treat thousands of cases in Tondo and Intramuros, including spiritual contacts. By spiritual contacts are meant conversions to Catholicism, adult communions, adult baptisms, holy communions, first confessions, validation of marriages and visits to orphanages and hospitals.

There is the UST Charity Hospital where last year, more than 13,000 cases were treated, mostly indigent patients from various Luzon provinces. This year, the UST expects to lose about P800,000 just maintaining the Charity Hospital.

There is the Institute of Catechetics where students teach religion to students of 25 elementary, 5 high schools and one youth center in the Greater Manila area and outlying provinces. There is also the Pax Romana.

Finally, there are the scholarships and discounts. Santo Tomas is very partial to the poor. She has a missionary role to play in these islands — and that is to take in as many poor but qualified students as she can. This year, one of every three UST student is enjoying a scholarship or discount. And at the Free High School, UST will lose about P15,000 this year to run it for poor students.

Similar efforts can certainly be made by others. Among the youth, a junior Cursillo seems to be quite effective. Problems of juvenile delinquency and school dropouts could be very inspiring jobs. Add to this adult education, and cottage industries.

In the seminary, future priests — considering the background of the Philippines — should make it a point to learn the rudiments of farming, livestock raising, vegetable gardening, and even fishing. It does not take much economic resources to start a vegetable plot which could be used to teach young children in school or in the neighborhood. Likewise, it takes little to start a small poultry project, the proceeds of which could go into scholarships for the poor.

Another specific area seminarians could engage in is the research and collection of data related to Filipino culture. Studies on the different languages, their literature, and customs will serve a great purpose to future generations.

Take Central Luzon. Or Mindanao. These are quiet volcanoes ready to erupt anytime. So many things can be done here by seminarians and priests. Social amelioration cannot be executed by the government sector alone. They need every help possible. This could be an area a priest should study well to see how far he can enter.

And how about priestly theology training? He should look at this as a means to an end — the service of God and his fellow beings. A priest should not stop at theology. He should let Christian theology permeate areas such as sociology, economics, history, political science, mass communications, agriculture, technology, science, farming, and psychology. The priest should not stop at philosophy. Philosophy must be used as a means to a total perspective—not a narrow perspective confined to pure speculation. This is the Philippines, an underdeveloped economy. Not Europe or America. The priest lives in areas of great dislocations. Not in the contented and quiet peace of the “convento”. He should bring that feverish zeal for service that the first Spanish missionaries brought to these islands many centuries ago. In this way the clergy can help solve the social problems of the country.