



UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST IN THE PHILIPPINES

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THE COUNCIL OF BISHOPS

A Pastoral Statement in

Commemoration of International Declaration Human Rights (UDHR) and
Celebration of Advent and Christmas

10 December 2022

*“I will remove from you all who mourn over the loss of your appointed festivals,
which is a burden and reproach for you. ¹At that time I will deal
with all who oppressed you. I will rescue the lame; I will gather the exiles.*

I will give them praise and honor in every land where they have suffered shame.” (Zechariah 3: 18-19)

Advent, the liturgical season where resides rising anticipation for better socio-economic condition in the country and in the world is also the time for introspection that entails self-examination of how Christian believers have veered away from the ethical measure for responsible, committed and faithful discipleship. This calls for metanoia or repentance from indifference and apathy to the plight of the least among us and those who have been neglected by the government and the Church.

This as well occasions to collectively affirm our God-given life and the inalienable human dignity unconditionally endowed to all persons. In the biblical sense, the value of human life is not found in the acquisition of wealth, and neither in the social position of power and influence. In many instances, Jesus Christ challenged those in the position of power and wealth to institute justice for the poor, deprived, oppressed and marginalized. He proclaimed liberty to the captives and oppressed and inaugurated in our midst the reign of God.

God’s reign is an ethical assertion of the quality and goodness of life with God and fellow human beings and seeks to effectively manifest in the actual life situation.

This assertion is normative in the faith and witness of the Church and an imperative in doing Christ’s ministry and mission. As such, programs that truly respond to injustice, poverty, oppression and other forms of inhumane situation have been narrowly understood by the powers-that-be as constituting rebellion or sedition that bound persons by its laws and police power.

The clash between the state’s power and the reign of God becomes inevitable when values and interests collide. Thus the state resort to use its coercive power to clamped down on suspected rebels or dissenters using its legal, political and economic power. As prescribed in the UDHR, respect for human rights of individuals and

communities is unidirectional, and particularly in the International Humanitarian Law, the state and its instrumentalities ought to protect the basic rights and welfare of the people. When a particular state fails to do this, nations and institutions that ascribe to the United Nations UDHR and other protocols can assert their right to protect vulnerable people.

It is not hidden from many of us that there are UCCP Church Workers and ordinary Church members who are illegally detained due to trumped up charges, the issuance of search and arrest warrants, red-tagging and the spread of fake news insinuating membership or extending support to the revolutionary movement in the country. These are systematically carried out by the state's military anti-surgency apparatuses such the NTF-ELCAC and state security forces. Even if the present government of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. claims to have been overcoming the culture of impunity, these are outweighed by the increasing cases of human rights violations including the economic, political and cultural rights of the people. We continue to seek justice, assert their release from imprisonment and support them in possible and meaningful ways.

On this Advent and Christmas season we are confronted with questions such as “Is it possible to have a decent life in the country?” and “What do socio-economic indicators tell us to hope and work for the better in the coming year?” The forecast is gloomy where the clouds of economic crisis seem not to dissipate, but rather getting darker as inflation rises to 8.0% that steadily increase the prices of commodities up to the level that daily wage earner could hardly provide, unemployment seem to decrease in October at 2.361 million but the underemployment is high at 7.028 million.

The National Statistics Authority (NSA) records the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth of 7.6 percent in the third quarter of 2022. The main contributors to the third quarter 2022 growth were: wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles, 9.1 percent; financial and insurance activities, 7.7 percent; and construction, 12.2 percent. Major economic sectors, namely: agriculture, forestry, and fishing, Industry, and services all posted positive growths in the third quarter of 2022 with 2.2 percent, 5.8 percent, and 9.1 percent, respectively. Agricultural productivity is very low at 2.2. percent, indicative of food insecurity and dependency on imported food supplies.

The country's indebtedness has reached to 13.517 trillion pesos or translated to 122,822.81 pesos per person of the 110 million population. Yet a significant portion of this went to corruption especially for the Covid-19 response and to previous and continuing budget in billions of the NTF-ELCAC, infrastructure projects, the military and police and debt servicing. Although budget for education and health has been slightly increased but the dire need for classrooms, teachers' salaries and health care services, the government budget for these remain inadequate.

We believe that it has been an exercise of people power when the citizens opposed the legislative agenda towards the establishment of Marhalika Sovereign Wealth Fund (MSWF), which was planned to be sourced from the endowment funds of the Social Security System (SSS) and the Government Insurance System (GSIS). Furthermore, we believe that this is ethically unsound and unbecoming for this plan come out in the midst

of the dire economic situation of the country and even with the shift in the sources of fund, this remains a despicable strategy of government executives fingers dipping into the financial coffers the people have contributed for their social benefits in the guise of financial investment.

“Peace on earth, goodwill to all people,” is the message of the angels to the shepherds keeping their flock at night, announcing the birth of Jesus, the newborn king more than two thousand years ago. Even today and in the coming years, we will continue to announce that peace based on justice is possible, social justice is attainable, compassion and love can still be actively expressed confronting the demonic powers and the destructive impact of both natural and human caused disasters.

Let us give our share in the realization of sustainable peace and firm up our hopes in God’s promise for a better life ahead for God’s people as articulated by prophet Zephaniah saying, “At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes^a before your very eyes.” (Zeph. 3: 20).

THE COUNCIL OF BISHOPS

10 December 2022



Bishop Melzar D. Labuntog
General Secretary



Bishop Joseph G. Agpaoa
North Luzon Jurisdictional Area



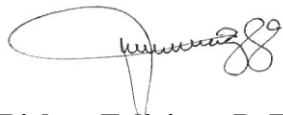
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