

Gawad Kalinga: The Spirituality of Nation Building

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The "Spirituality of Nation Building" was given by Antonio Meloto last October 5, 2007 as a public lecture in theology in Ateneo de Manila University.

Today, I am not here to preach or lecture for I am not a religious leader or a teacher in theology. I am just an ordinary Filipino in search of answers - why my country is poor, and a Catholic wondering why my people are corrupt. My nationality and religion are intertwined in defining who I am. In the process of raising certain issues about my birthright, it is not my intention to judge our religious institutions or to doubt my belief systems. It is simply to discover more honest expressions in showing that God did not make a mistake in designing me the way I am—and the Filipino, the way he is. I realize that I should be more honest in asking relevant and even embarrassing questions about my faith if my goal is to seek greater faithfulness and integrity in practicing it.

The journey that began for me 12 years ago in Bagong Silang, Caloocan City with 127 out of school youth, mostly gang members, was the start of a process—the spirit we now call Gawad Kalinga—of bridging the disconnect between faith and action, between preaching and practice. Even with my limited understanding, it is clear to me that the lack of conviction in putting faith into action has led to the inequity in wealth, inequality in status and the long history of injustice that has made our country the most corrupt and one of the poorest in Asia.

Poverty is the consequence when we do not walk our talk.

Hypocrisy justifies how we live with it.

We cannot talk about nation building without touching on religion since more than 80% of Filipinos are Catholics and their control and influence in the country is almost absolute. A strong nation needs a strong moral foundation. If we are a weak nation it must be because we are a weak people with nominal faith, lacking in character and moral conviction. A weak people elect corrupt leaders who use immoral power for personal gain, who impose their will on the weak majority with the use of force and violence. Corruption, greed, and violence that cause poverty are social ills that define us as a nation. In religion they are called sins. We cannot regain our pride as Filipinos unless we remove these ills. We cannot call ourselves Christians until we decide to purge these sins.

"Are we poor because we are Catholic or are we Catholic because we are poor?" This question raised by a Jesuit priest brings to mind the thought whether religion had failed us as a people. Clearly, God is not to blame for our poverty and corruption. My Church did not fail me, I failed my Church. The sermons and the bible are replete with moral guidelines for a just and upright life for all, yet we who hear these have failed to live them out. We are poor because we failed to practice our religion. We compromised our integrity and tolerated corruption. We lowered our standard and accepted poverty.

In short, we became unfaithful. We lost faith in God, in our institutions, in each other, and in ourselves. We forgot the master plan, we lost our direction, we became a divided people and a weak nation. The Filipino has become his own worst enemy. We cultivated behavioral aberrations and cultural patterns that make it difficult for us to cut the cycle of poverty and remove corruption.

First is our split-level Christianity. We live double-lives: one inside the Church and another one the moment we step out of it. We have two laws that govern one life. Piety in our Christian environment, and self interest in the workplace. We learn to be our brother's keeper in our Christian teaching yet we practice apathy towards the need of others in our daily life. In dealing with the poor, our Christian compassion is mostly limited to giving alms making mendicancy a way of life for many. We stopped at pity towards the poor, instead of learning to genuinely care for them in the way that Christ showed us. We stopped at dole outs, instead of growing towards full maturity in Christian stewardship.

For me to be a real Christian I must practice Christianity.

Second is our double standard of morality. The prevailing state of inequality in our country is pronounced not only in a different justice system for the rich and the poor but more remarkably in the behavior of men and women. Men generally are on a survival mode in a third-world setting like the Philippines. They develop their predatory instincts and physical strength more than their intellect— dropping out of school early, attracted to jobs that require more brawn than brain, growing up with a fascination for weapons that draw them to gangs and syndicates engaged in illegal activities. Women on the other hand, who are designed by God for life giving and nurturing, learn to develop their emotional, spiritual, and intellectual strength— making them stronger and live longer—to cope in a similar environment. A difficult situation brings out the martyr in the women and the predator in the men. The patterns are clear. Raised under subhuman conditions, men are more prone to be irresponsible, unreliable, and abusive. Our criminals are mostly male. Our rebels are mostly male. Our corrupt politicians are mostly male; the politics of guns, goons and gold are expressions of our immoral macho culture. Thus, there is a clear bias in favor of women in poverty and development programs because they are easier to deal with and produce better results like those involved in microfinance.

Development to be effective must not lose sight of the need in also prioritizing help for men to develop character, to grow in their role as provider of the home and protector of their community in accordance with their divine design. Convert them from liability to asset, from burden to blessing, and raise them to be heroes and patriots for their country. If men are the problem, they can also be the solution.

Real Filipino men are those who are ready to die for honor, not those willing to live in shame.`

Third is our "matapobre" culture. The historical pattern of exclusion and discrimination of the poor majority by the elite minority still prevail today. We who have been blessed with better opportunities in life feel safe living in exclusive communities, oblivious to the misery of Lazarus outside our subdivision gates. The poor are not our friends. They are our servants that we treat kindly because we are Christians, beggars that we should be charitable to or threats to our safety that we should wisely avoid. We look down on the poor when our Christianity demands that we exalt them the way Jesus did. We insult the poor by living extravagant first world lifestyles in a third world environment. Jesus calls on us to raise up the poor among us—those who are the least in opportunity, the lowest in status, and the last in priority. It is not hard to find the poor—they are all around us. We can make caring for them the new status symbol and nation building the new lifestyle. The new Filipino elite are those with the most who give the best to the least.

The truly rich are those who value the poor more than money.

Fourth is our crab mentality. This is our habit of bashing and blaming, of pushing and pulling

people down. The concept of the collective good is difficult to practice when people are on a survival mode. The hungry and the angry find it easier to destroy than to build, to steal rather than work. Crabbing is the natural outlet to societal frustration when there is absence of hope or caring for those at the bottom. Envy is a common attitude towards those who succeed in their endeavors, even to those who work for causes that give hope.

Rather than wait for the poor majority to pull down by force the few who are on top, we must inspire those at the peak to go down to the weak and the fallen and raise them up with love. We must convince the poor that we will not leave them behind, that we will not cross the finish line without them. The book of Acts states it simply: "God's community of believers shared their resources with one another and no one was in need." Being community of believers is about solidarity. It is about a relationship of caring and sharing. It is about presence—a giving of self to people we genuinely care about. It is finding joy when we see their dignity restored, when their lives get better—helping the poor become unpoor. The real poor are those who do not know the poor.

In my faith journey, I have learned to relate to God through different forms of prayer. As a catholic, I memorized rote prayer early and nurtured my spirituality through liturgical and devotional prayer. Retreats in college introduced the contemplative type and I learned to pray charismatically when I joined Couples for Christ. They are all designed to bring presence and to nurture a relationship with God. But I realized that oftentimes they are mostly about me—about my needs and wants, my plans, my family and the people who are important to me. Jesus' prayer was about faith in God's plan—"Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus is about presence on earth, about building God's Kingdom in this life. God the designer, Jesus the builder. Jesus is not about living for self, but living for others. He told Peter if you love me "feed my sheep." Jesus is about feeding the hungry, healing the sick, building homes and communities. Caring for the poor is not mere social work. It is the heart of the mission of Jesus. I do not know Jesus if I do not know the poor.

As a Christian and Filipino, I am constantly challenged with choices and decisions that demand my faithfulness to my divine purpose. I call these my faith moments. To love or to hate, to despair or to hope, to build or to destroy, to be honest or to cheat- I am faced with life or death, heaven or hell situations everyday. My choices define who I am, influence those around me and affect the state of my country and the world.

First are my Adam moments. These are invitations to proper stewardship- to come to terms with my original design for goodness and excellence as a child of God and to execute the blueprint for a prosperous and just society taught to me at home, in school and in church. As the Filipino Adam it is my responsibility to protect the environment, to promote good governance in politics, to develop market with a social conscience and to build abundance for all where no Filipino is in need.

Second are my Abraham moments. These are moments when God calls me to surrender my Isaacs—the things that are most precious to me for the sake of others. Isaac was Abraham's most precious, a gift from God given to him and his wife Sarah in their very old age. Just like Abraham and most parents my children are also my precious. I want the best for them, but my idea of best may not please God if it will deprive many others their just share in the country's goods. This means sharing my land to the landless, building homes for the homeless and growing food for the hungry. Until I learn to make the poor my heir, my own children will not have security and quality of life in this land.

The third are my Judas moments. These are times of betrayal, of abandoning the ideal for what is practical, of selling out when the price is right. The Judases in our midst are not only the corrupt politicians, the gambling lords, the land grabbers, the crime syndicates and evil-doers who prey on the poor and make us a poor nation. They are mostly ordinary people like myself who profess to know Jesus but who easily sellout for a few silver pieces. They include mass going Catholics and bible-quoting Christians who cheat on their taxes and in elections, bend rules and disregard merit for patronage. Religion that does not build character breeds a nation of Judases.

Finally, my Jesus moments, are the daily opportunities to build on the innate goodness of the Filipino. While it is important to be vigilant in pointing out injustice and wrongdoing, I am called to just as vigorously honor what is good and what is right. I need to consciously extol kindness, generosity, hard work and heroism until these qualities become second nature to me. Jesus moments are opportunities to bring about societal change motivated by love, nurtured by caring, pursuing the path of peace. We are called to be witnesses to a lifestyle that brings hope, builds heroism and restores honor. By practicing true discipleship, we can build a first-world nation that honors God.

Ateneo de Manila President Fr. Ben Nebres talks about nation building, like the Gawad Kalinga model, as a Filipino response to a Filipino problem, anchored on strong faith and family values and aspirations. It is a development model that merges faith and patriotism, spirit and science, holiness and heroism. He is not referring to a self-centered religion and family ties that only seek the interest of kin which can be barriers to development but about the capacity for caring and sacrifice that Filipinos are capable of because of their love for God and devotion to family. It is about loving the Philippines and pride in being Filipino.

The GK brand is a Filipino creation with a global mission to show religion not as opium but as faith that fuels growth. The branding is a marketing strategy to make love of God and country popular and exciting and make the Filipino believe that he has the power to move mountains of garbage and transform slums into beautiful communities. It is the good news about the Filipino that sells newspapers, the corporate campaign designed to prove that marketing hope is good business. The brand transcends social, political, cultural and religious borders for everyone to desire it and demands a contribution of excellence as its price tag for every Filipino to be proud to wear it. It aims to generate massive co-branding strong enough for politicians to deliver the promise, for businessmen to share the profit, for Christians and Moslems to walk the talk. It must be powerful enough to make weak and inconsistent Christians like myself believe that the way to holiness is marked daily by little and big acts of heroism, that the door to heaven in the afterlife is wide open to those who liberate the poor from hell and misery in this life.

Today, it is my joy to see my children and many others join the Gawad Kalinga pilgrimage of hope. What began with Couples for Christ is now embraced by other religious organizations as their own journey of faith. What started in The Philippines is now spreading to other developing countries. In time, this nation in darkness will not only shine but will be a light to the world.

Let me end by asking all of you to start looking at yourself no longer as second- class citizens of a third world nation. Like Jesus, let us all be architects of hope and builders of dreams for our people who have lost their capacity to hope and to dream. Let us be patriots and saints who will restore the abundance of a rich land and the honor of a great people loved by a great God.