

September 28, 2008 - 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Prepared by Sr. Helen R. Graham, MM - Philippines

Ezekiel 18: 25-28	The wicked one who turns from wickedness to do what is right and just, preserves his or her life.
Psalms 25: 4-5, 6-7, 8-9	Remember no more the sins of my youth; remember me only in light of your love.
Philippians 2: 1-11	Put on the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.
Matthew 21: 28-32	In this parable, the son who says he will not go to work in the fields but who later changes his mind is the one who does the father's will.

“Sinners’ back Lozada.” That was the unusual headline on the front page of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* for March 3, 2008.

Several men from a provincial area outside of Manila had formed themselves into an informal group called the “Sinners Club” – a motley collection of men of all ages, convictions, and lifestyles – in an effort to show support for someone who recently exposed the anomalies and corruption involved in a \$329-million, grossly overpriced National Broadband Network deal between the government of the Philippines and a foreign corporation. The group’s spokesman commented that “Jun [Lozada] is a sinner too, and he has admitted to being so. He has the strength to face [persecution] so he can tell the truth . . . So we said that if we did our part, we will all be like [him], all sinners who also have good in us.” True, Jun had himself played along until, as he says, he was offered a very large sum of money to lie to the Senate. At that point his conscience got the better of him and he decided to “do what is right” — at the risk of his own life, and the safety of his wife and five children (who have had to stop schooling), without much savings and uncertain about his future.

This story made me think of this morning’s first reading from the prophet Ezekiel’s 18th chapter where the prophet puts forth the new principle of individual moral responsibility. The prophet, speaking for God, takes issue with a popular proverb expressing the belief that the children suffer for the sins of the former generation. *What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"? As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel.*

There is ample support for such a popular belief in the Decalogue, for example, in which it is said that God is *a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation . . .* (Exodus 20:5; see Deuteronomy 5:9 and Exodus 34:7). Against such a conviction, Ezekiel claims that each individual is responsible for his or her own behavior. *The person who sins shall die. A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own.* You can’t shift the blame to the previous generation, says the prophet. You must take responsibility for you own response to the situation.

In the excerpt for today’s liturgy Ezekiel goes even one step further. He argues that even a person’s own past behavior does not determine their fate provided they embark on a change of behavior. Thus, if the unrighteous *turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die.* Like the son in Matthew’s parable who, at first, said “I will not’ but later changed his mind and went” (Matthew 21:29), this Filipino, who admitted to having been part of the endemic corruption sapping this nation of money badly needed for national development, changed his mind and took up the burden of truth. His act of courage was contagious and inspired a group of men to form the “Sinners Club.” There is a rabbinic saying: “In the place where the repentant sinner stands,

even the completely righteous are not able to stand.” Such a one will have a great reward for, as Maimonides wrote, “he has tasted sin and yet, separated himself from it, conquering his [evil] inclination” and therefore “he transcends the level of those who never sinned at all.”

Unfortunately corruption is endemic to Philippine society. This is not the first contract made with a foreign company involving blatant corruption, bribery and overpricing. A celebrated case was that of the Bataan-Westinghouse Nuclear Power Plant built 60 miles from Manila near several earthquake fault lines and at the foot of Mount Pinatubo, which at the time was dormant. It took almost 32 years for the country to pay off the debt for this “monument to folly” that never produced a single watt of electricity. It cost the Filipino taxpayers \$460 million dollars on a debt of \$1.06 billion.

The Catholic bishops of the Philippines have raised the question of the heavy burden of the foreign debt “whether our people should be made to repay fraudulent debts which were either used for useless prestige projects or which were the results of corruption.”

In a pastoral letter written February 27, 2008, Bishop Socrates “Soc” Villegas wrote: “The heaviest cross weighing heavily on the shoulders of the Filipino now is corruption in public life. This corruption has reached scandalous depths and mind boggling figures.” So serious is the situation that Bishop Soc issued the following call at the end of his letter: “Let us all resign from corruption, from indifference, from lies, from arrogant use of power. Corruption is not just a crime of the government. It has become our national livelihood. . .”

It is always possible to repent and start anew, to “put on the same mind that was in Christ Jesus” as the reading from Philippians puts it. Here we have a concrete example of a man who has turned away from corruption because of his faith in the God to whom the psalmist prays: “Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness sake, O Lord!” and who is paying dearly the price for it in his life.

For more information:

Corruption can disrupt any political system. Politicians need to be reminded constantly of their duty to represent the people who elect them. It is important to establish this dialogue with politicians in an election year and to maintain it through each day those politicians serve in office. Read policy suggestions and questions to ask in Maryknoll’s “Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world,” a resource developed by Maryknoll missionaries who witness the global impact of U.S. political and economic decisions. Through this resource, Maryknoll missionaries encourage voters in the 2008 elections to scrutinize candidates’ policy proposals through the lens of those who, both in the U.S. and overseas, lack basic necessities, endure the scourge of racism, live with gender-based discrimination or feel the immediate impact of climate change.

Email for a copy, or find the election guide here:
www.maryknollogc.org/2008elections/index.htm

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