



# A Sharing with the CBCP General Assembly

Christian S.  
Monsod

BBC National Co-Chairman

## Your Excellencies,

Thank you for giving us this opportunity to address you despite your full agenda. We asked for this session because there are suggestions that BBC may have lived out its time and its relevance, and it may be time to fold up its operations.

We thought about that after the glow of EDSA when we thought that the reform movement had taken on a life of its own. We had brought down a dictatorship and had brought up the hopes of a people that, with democracy, the promise of a new social order was at hand.

But history has not been kind to our poor. We live in a world of broken promises, and we were not going to be the exception. I will not belabor the dismal data of our failure of development. You are at the frontlines in this battle and know very well what is happening at the peripheries of our nation.

But, as someone recently said, the 2016 elections was the first real occupation of the center by the periphery, when the ordinary people thought that real change was possible because they were finally being listened to. And that their everyday problems of criminality, the drug problem, the traffic crisis and the many small injustices they suffer daily might be stopped by a government who cares.

If they are right, then we are on the cusp of a momentous change that we never imagined could happen in our country.

There are signs that they may be right. I am convinced that the President is genuinely pro-poor and he chose a cabinet from diverse backgrounds whose only common denominator may be a heart for the poor. For those without a consistent record in that regard, his marching orders to them, I am told, is that they were appointed to help and not to hurt the poor. It took courage to choose such a cabinet.

If he can make that cabinet work together, he can make the country work together.

Three days ago, I received a text from Ito Carlos that I will repeat to you because it represents the progressive character of the BBC businessmen of which he is a prime example: “this administration will definitely focus on the poverty issue and the countryside. This presents the opportunity for Bishops and Businessmen to pursue all aspects of Human Development most effectively with government support. This seems to be the time we have been waiting for to grow our services and not to quit.”

Indeed, we can play a meaningful role in this administration. There are many decisions that have to be made where wrong or misguided policies and action plans, which have happened many times in the past, may happen again. As we have learned from experience, it is not enough to be sincere and well-meaning, it is equally important to be correct in what we do.

To be listened to, we need the moral ascendancy and sometimes temporal persuasive powers of the clergy. We are the junior partners in our partnership. Alone, we cannot do it.

**“This seems to be the time we have been waiting for to grow our services and not to quit.”**

There are only three organizations with a national reach in the country – the local government system, the police and the military, and the institutional church. Our partnership has done well in this regard. In reviewing the history of BBC, I realized that we have fought 5 of the past 6 presidents, involving the issue of social justice, and we have won everytime.

There was Marcos of course, when BBC organized

Namfrel with its 500,000 volunteers who stood up to him to protect the ballot, which led to what is called EDSA but which happened everywhere in the country. Then there was the PIRMA initiative of Ramos to remove term limits which was stopped in its tracks by the rally at the Luneta called by Cory and Cardinal Sin and later struck down by the Supreme Court. And then Estrada, whose stepping down turned out to be a pyrrhic victory when Arroyo extended him a full pardon and Cory apologized to him for helping bring him down. And there was Arroyo with her people's initiative where One Voice which counted with several BBC bishops as co-convenors, some of whom are here today. One Voice was the lead co-counsel with the Senate before the Supreme Court which struck down Sigao ng Bayan by an 8-7 vote, in one of its golden moments.

Finally, the Hacienda Luisita case, where Aquino III reneged on his promise to distribute the land and where ALG (Alternative Law Group) and BBC lawyers represented 1,250 farmers (out of 6,500) in the Supreme Court case. The farmers won the land by a vote of 13-0, another golden moment for the Supreme Court.

However, the Luisita case is an instance where we could not get a statement of support for the farmers from CBCP, for reasons of friendship and of patronage. Yes, we too have our low moments together. But the farmers are very grateful to CBCP-NASSA which gave them full support during and after the case.

Our collaboration sometimes included back-channelling that is a part of the legislative process away from the public eye where some posturing may be inevitable. There was the advocacy for CARPER where a lot of the work was done in personal meetings with legislators and even with the President.

And then there was the RH Bill where two private meetings between BBC bishops and the leadership of the House, both for and against the bill, resulted in the adoption of wordings proposed by the bishops for certain controversial provisions, under condition of no attribution. Such that in the plenary debate, when a critical congressman was attacking the wording of a provision, congressman Lagman, the sponsor of the bill, could not say that it was suggested by a bishop.

Five victories against five presidents is a good record. But, these and other victories, big and small, are far from

adding up to the radical social change we want.

David Thoreau suggests that we can hack away at the branches of a tree of evil but it will keep on growing until we strike at its roots. Every development plan since EDSA is an agenda for change expressed in different ways – development with a human face, growth with equity and lately, inclusive growth. But, so far, none of the plans have produced the desired results. Is this because no administration had the political will to implement these plans or is it because these plans were not meant to strike at the roots but only at the branches?

Study after study tell us that our failure of development is due mainly to flawed policies and weak institutions that are deeply rooted in political dishonesty and self-serving political dynasties, also described as feudalism. And these have been impervious to change though two colonial periods, our independence, martial rule and the EDSA event, with the ruling elite, meaning us, merely rotating power among themselves.

Thus, if BBC is allowed to continue, we have to decide on how to deal with structural issues, that will help or hinder, a critical collaboration with the Duterte Administration, such as, but not limited to: (1) the issue of a sometimes perverted sense of due process in addressing criminality and the drug problems (2) the twin structural problems of corruption and political dynasties, (3) the issue of federalism as the vehicle for peace and development and (4) over the longer term, the need for a new generation of leaders who know how it is to be poor.

This is the agenda that we cannot allow again to remain unfulfilled. But isn't this what the 35 bishops and 35 businessmen meant in their Consensus Statement of 1971 which said:

"....The commission which the Church has from Christ is not simply to "save souls", or "to bring them to heaven." The Church has a task in this world. The church has a responsibility toward the temporal order.....To accomplish this task, the Church, both as people of God and as a human institution, must necessarily concern itself with the development of people, with their human development; economic, social, political, cultural and spiritual."

Your excellencies, aren't we all the Church of Christ?

Thank you.