

MEETING WITH THE THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF THE THE PHILIPPINES - July 10, 2016



Talk to Bishops

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Dear Brother Bishops and friends in the business community.

I make an appeal for the Bishops- Businessmen's Conference for Human Development (BBCHD) by sharing my experiences with it. The first time I joined the CBCP Plenary Assembly was in July of 2006. Everything was new for me then, including the BBC. It was the first time that I joined the BBC General Assembly, which was then held at AIM in Makati. I joined it because it was found in the schedule and there was a bus waiting to take us there. I did not notice that not all the bishops were present. It was only later on, after several General Assemblies, that it was made clear to me that it was voluntary for the bishops to join BBC. All the while I thought it was part of the CBCP just like the Episcopal commissions meetings. I joined anyway, not missing any of its General Assemblies.

What made me stay on? The issues and the business people. The issues that were discussed grounded me in the realities of country, like mining, agrarian reform, work ethics, politics, corruption, and upliftment of the poor.

It was also a good opportunity for me to meet people of business and politics whose names I only read in the papers, Christian Monsod, Ramon Del Rosario, Jose Concepcion, Vicente Paterno and so on. But more than just the names, it was good to realize that there were businesspeople who also have the heart for the poor, who also care for the well-being of the country and the environment. I am sorry for the friends in business here, but I must admit that before my BBC days, I had the stereotype of business men and women: they care only for their pockets, they are crafty in getting as much profit as possible, even to the point of skinning their workers down to the bones, and that they care more for their foreign partners who bring in capital than for their fellow Filipinos.

So I was always weary of business people as I was with politicians. I am sorry to my fellow bishops. I also shared then the unspoken bias: business is worth dealing with in the church if only they can provide funding for our projects. If they are stingy (and they are stingy if they do not help because they have money or else they will not stay in business), why bother with them at all!

My involvement with the BBC changed these stereotypes little by little. My involvement also came little by little. First I was just attending the General Assemblies every July. Then I gave some talks in the assembly because I was involved in the social issues as head of the National Secretariat for Social Action (NASSA). Then I came to working with some business partners on corruption issues, then in NAMFREL, then on agrarian reform, then on labor issues. A time came that I was elected as part of the executive committee. So the meetings I was involved in was not only once a year on July, not only occasionally when there are special meetings on particular issues, but now regularly as we meet once every two months as the Execom. It was then that I saw business not just as a milking cow but as a partner.

Business as a dialogue partner

In dialogue there is mutuality. There are things that we hold in common; there are things that we do not agree on. We hold in common the belief that well-being should be shared if we want to have a climate of peace and tranquility where both the faith and business can grow. We may not agree in some of the means. We can discuss these. As a churchman it is important for me to see how business people see reality. They are also good people.

Many of them are deeply Catholic as in the Philippines most of our business leaders are educated in Catholic homes and Catholic schools. There is indeed a lot of common ground for dialogue. One of the great tools that we have in these dialogues is the Catholic Social Teachings.

Unfortunately many business leaders do not know these, and many times they do not know because we in the Church have not taught them and expounded on them in our schools and in our churches. As Caritas in Veritate of Pope Benedict states many times: the Catholic Social Teachings make good business sense. It makes good business sense that workers are contented and their basic needs are met, and they have extra income so that money can circulate in the community.

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It does not make good business sense to have fewer people as there will be fewer workers and consumers. It does not make good business sense to kill the land by excessive chemical fertilizers. It is not sustainable. In the BBC we have a venue to discuss social and political realities armed with the principles of the social teachings. Meanwhile in these discussions, I realize that I am dealing with people who are not YES PEOPLE. Businesspeople do not just believe because the Church says so, unlike when we speak to children or the uneducated.

Business people have their own minds; they are educated; they are expressive. In this sense, we in the church may not be prepared to dialogue with them. For me it is refreshing to speak with people who do not agree with me all the time and who are able to say so in a polite manner. They make me stretch my ideas and widen my views. I also learn a lot from them about the ins and outs of business and politics. This is welcome to me because I have the opportunity to dialogue with business, with those in politics or are connected with politicians; I also dialogue with workers, with informal settlers, with farmers and with ordinary parishioners. I can see reality better, the reality that needs to be animated with the Gospel. Is this not also what Pope Francis tells us in so many words? – to stay connected with people and not just with our enclosed church circles?

Business as a lobby partner

BBC has helped me connect with the realm of politics in the country. We know that business and politics are very much connected in the Philippines. Through our friends in BBC we are able to connect with politicians and government offices. With BBC we are able to dialogue with DAR, DENR, DA and DSWS. There were even several dialogues with Presidents GMA and PNOY facilitated by BBC on issues of mining and agrarian reform. Due to the Church component of the BBC we were able to bring the concerns of the farmers to business groups such as the Makati Business Club or the Management Associate of the Philippines. We get the help of business and other politicians to support our campaign against APECO. BBC is also part Tabang Mindanao and Tabang Visayas projects occasioned by the draught of El Nino in 1998 and the Yolanda disaster in 2012. We know that NAMFREL came from BBC. Every election there is coordination between NAMFREL and NASSA. Indeed the Church and Business can bring their voice and their efforts together to work for justice and authentic human development.

Partner in reaching out to the other sectors in society.

I have heard one objection. Why partner only with business? Why not partner also with farmers, laborers and other sectors in society? Can we also have Bishops-Farmers Conference, or Bishops-Labor Conference?

Indeed the Church and Business can bring their voice and their efforts together to work for justice and authentic human development.

I do not know the wisdom of the bishops back then in 1972 when they set up the BBC that they partnered only with business.

But as per experience in my involvement with the BBC, although the conference is with the business people, the concern of the BBC is not only with the Church and Business. In our Second National Rural Congress in 2010 the BBC was very much involved.

In several of our BBC General Assemblies we have invited labor leaders, urban poor leaders and indigenous peoples who gave their views on poverty and inequality. The academe is also represented in these assemblies.

In the future we can even have as one of the programs of BBC to connect us bishops and business with the various sectors. We can have meetings in the BBC with the urban poor at one time, with the fisher folks at another time, with IPs at yet another.

I have a suspicion that one practical reason, but unexpressed, why the conference is done with business is because business has the resources to call for meetings and assemblies. If we would have the Bishop-IP conference, who will pay for the IPs to come to our assemblies? They do not have the means for such meetings.

Business has the resources - the personnel, the know-how and perhaps even the finances to bring bishops, business and other people together. But this is also a problem. It has reported to you that the Cardinal Sin Fund is dwindling. Fewer business people join the BBC. Corporate membership does not increase. Why? Perhaps business now see little relevance to connect with bishops.

Do we want that we bishops be sidelined to irrelevance? Gone are the days when people rush to us and see that it is good for them to be identified with us. This is no longer so. For business in our times, it is even a disadvantage for their business to be identified with us. In a secular culture in which we are in, unless we go out of our way to reach out to people, they will just sideline us and leave us in our sacristies.

Personally I believe that BBC is still relevant, both for us and for business. But we have to show that we are interested in it, that we are ready to dialogue, that we can partner with businesspeople to advance the kingdom of God. We bishops can greatly contribute to revitalizing BBC and make it an instrument to reach out to more people.

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How?

- By attending meetings
- By organizing local chapters of BBC in your key cities
- By constant exchanges with business leaders

A word of caution: Let us not use BBC just as our source of funds. We can not be co-opted by business, nor should we attempt to co-opt business. The words are partnership and dialogue. If we bishops show interest in the BBC, business will also be enthusiastic with it and support its programs. Personally, it would be a great loss for us bishops to lose a venue that has proven to be a viable and vibrant platform of dialogue and partnership for human development in our country. But if we want to continue this conference, let us be committed to it. We cannot get commitment from business if we are half-hearted in supporting it. To paraphrase Pope Francis: ***Let us open the doors of our churches not just to let people in but for us to go out to meet people where they are.***

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Pope Francis