NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Philippines' 'people power' revolt produced project for societal transformation

N.J. Viehland | Feb. 27, 2012

Former presidents Fidel Ramos and Joseph Estrada join President Benigno Aquino III and other politicians at the "people power" anniversary monument in Quezon City, Philippines. (Jun Mestica)

MANILA, Philippines -- The president and Manila's archbishop have called on Filipinos everywhere to act against corruption and divisiveness and to complete what they began with their peaceful uprising against Ferdinand Marcos' authoritarian rule 26 years ago.

In separate celebrations over the weekend, Manila Archbishop Luis Antonio Tagle and Philippines President Benigno Aquino III urged Filipinos to do their share in building a moral society and cleaning up the government to commemorate the anniversary of the Manila revolt that forced Marcos to step down as president. Marcos fled to Hawaii with his family Feb. 25, 1986, after Catholic bishops advised church members to reject results of that year's "fraudulent" polls [1].

Three days before Marcos was deposed, more than a million people trekked to Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA), as the late Cardinal Jaime Sin of Manila had advised in a radio appeal [2]. The protestors positioned themselves between Marcos' loyalist soldiers and the rebel troops to prevent a military coup from spilling blood. Nuns, priests, seminarians and other people in their ranks stayed to pray the rosary, offer flowers to soldiers and sing songs of peace and freedom until Marcos stepped down.

His leaving paved the way for the installation of Benigno's mother, the late President Corazon Aquino, who had challenged Marcos in elections that year.

In his homily for the anniversary Mass at Our Lady of Peace Shrine on Saturday, Tagle referred to speeches

politicians, government officials and key characters in 1986 delivered at other EDSA anniversary events earlier in the day.

"What seemed clear is that [people power] is a live and dynamic process," Tagle said. "This is an event involving so many citizens who were gradually awakened, gradually taking responsibility and gradually locking arms."

It shows that no genuine change for peace can happen through one person, just the elected officials or through people going in each one's own way, he said.

"Peace born out of justice, truth, love and respect for life is our common concern and should be our common project," Tagle said.

Benigno's sister, Maria Elena, and one of his nephews were at the Mass.

EDSA is not just the historic avenue where the people gathered, Tagle added.

"EDSA was wherever there was a Filipino was who was aspiring, praying and moving for the welfare of their beloved country," he said.

Tagle was in Washington, D.C., when the uprising broke out, working on his theology licentiate at The Catholic University of America. He joined Filipinos from various states in standing vigil in front of the White House "to express our aspirations," he said. They wore T-shirts in Corazon Aquino's yellow campaign color that read, "I was at EDSA."

Tagle said his professor and classmates celebrated with him when the peaceful movement succeeded.

"Everyone, every Filipino was standing tall, proclaiming to the world, 'I am a Filipino,' " he said. "And the rest of the world wanted to learn from us."

The next few years saw civilian sectors leading democracy movements in Indonesia, China's Tiananmen Square and Germany, and can now be seen in the Arab Spring movement.

"Critical collaboration"

However, the alliance between church and state immediately following the EDSA uprising wore out as poverty and social inequality persisted and government failed to make the newly restored democracy and laws work for the people.

"The [Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines'] official position towards government is critical collaboration," said Fr. Edwin Gariguez, executive secretary of the CBCP's National Secretariat for Social Action (NASSA). CBCP's network cooperates with government programs and projects that parallel church teaching and speaks out against moral infirmities, he said.

He cited several collaborative efforts and partnerships the network has engaged in with the Department of Social Welfare and Development and other agencies for poverty reduction [3] and joint diocesan and local government unit responses to calamities [4].

Loretta Ann Rosales, the government's Commission on Human Rights chairperson, also recently committed to work with lawmakers and local officials of Aurora Province on residents' claims that the government's economic zone along the Pacific Ocean violates rights of local and indigenous communities and threatens their livelihood [5]. Local people, supported by their parish priest, work together to report what they say are illegal

land sales and destruction of fishing sites, waterways and rice farms.

The list of questionable programs and situations through the years is substantial and include dismal human rights records [6], election fraud, corruption, a sagging economy, and various economic policies, such as those covering mining, that threaten to destroy local communities.

"On all these issues, we have to speak out on what the church teaches," Gariguez said.

Stay out of state affairs

The CBCP has its critics, too, who primarily complain about church people meddling in state matters [7].

In his homily, however, Tagle stressed that the church's involvement with issues of the state has a biblical basis.

The bishop compared EDSA people power to God's way of seeking out those co-operators, such as Abraham, Moses and the whole nation of Israel, to form itself and its peace.

"That is why, today, this is my appeal: Everyone get involved. We will not progress in our quest for peace if we will just wait for what our government will do," Tagle said.

He added that when people say the church meddles too much with affairs of the state, "we are just following what God said. Can we say we are a God-centered nation when we are cheating people and stepping on other people's toes?"

To those who disregard the power and teachings of God, he warned, "we cannot establish a just, truthful, loving and respectful society if its members just set God aside." He said that a nation without God would crumble.
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Continuing movement

In his speech, Aquino acknowledged troubles with public officials' morality and ethics. He described the country's justice system as "two-faced." [8] t

At Manila's Rizal Park, where Aquino laid wreaths at the monument of his parents, Corazon and Benigno Aquino Jr., he appealed for help with government's efforts to reform the system. Aquino Jr. had led the opposition to Marco's dictatorship -- the elder Aquino's assassination in 1983 galvanized the populist movement against Marcos. Corazon Aquino served six years as president after Marcos left power and remained influential in politics until her death in 2009 of cancer.

On Monday, the Philippines Congress was preparing for day 24 of the administration-backed impeachment trial [9] of Chief Justice Renato Corona on 8 charges that include betrayal of public trust and judging in favor of ex-president Gloria Arroyo, who is charged with poll fraud.

Rumors were rife that a massive prayer rally by the homegrown Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ) religious

organization scheduled for Tuesday at Rizal Park is a rally of support for Corona [10].

Speaking in Filipino, Aquino also appealed to people to take the chance to correct past mistakes and make history right.

"If you prefer the old system, go ahead and play deaf, blind and mute and don't participate," he said.

Aquino led those gathered in signing a pledge on the commitment wall at the People Power Monument not far from the shrine, which was built as a memorial to the people's peaceful uprising.

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