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Manila archbishop blasts public officials over money scandal

N.J. Viehland | Aug. 14, 2013
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Manila?s archbishop made an impassioned appeal to Philippine lawmakers and former government officials implicated in a scandal involving the misuse of millions of dollars of public money earmarked for poverty alleviation and development programs, asking them to repent their crimes and calling for a thorough investigation into the allegations.

Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle turned emotional at times as he discussed with reporters what has become known as the ?pork barrel scam,? in which scores of lawmakers redirected government development funds for personal benefit.

?Who wouldn?t shudder at the magnitude of the money involved and the machinations uncovered in the news day by day?? Tagle told reporters Tuesday.

?What Filipino with some love for country will not be heartbroken ? especially if you are a follower of Jesus; it?s like your heart is crushed. Can a person do this to a fellow human being?? he said, his voice cracking with emotion at times.

Justice Secretary Leila de Lima announced Aug. 12 that the National Bureau of Investigation was probing allegations that lawmakers misused

* 900 million pesos ($20 million) of gas funds that were meant to aid rebuilding projects in places ravaged by typhoons in 2009, and

* 10 billion pesos ($230 million) in Priority Development Assistance Funds. Each lawmaker is allotted a set amount of money (200 million pesos per senator and 70 million per representative) that he or she can direct to poverty alleviation program in her or his home district.

The lawmakers and the agrarian reform department allegedly released the funds to dummy non-governmental organizations operated by businesswoman Janet Lim Napoles, but the NGOs split the funds between Napoles and the lawmakers without implementing projects.

De Lima gave no indication of how many lawmakers are being investigated, but Rappler.com [1], a Philippines-based news website reported Tuesday that at least five senators and 23 congressmen are involved and as many as 49 lawmakers could be investigated.

The government ombudsman has convened a special panel to hear allegations against Nasser Pangandaman, a former agrarian reform secretary and now a House representative, as well as others identified as having been involved in the gas fund scam.

Tagle was speaking at a press conference to announce an October gathering of Philippine Catholics under the

theme, ?The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith.? One discussion track at the conference, he said, will be ?bringing the person of Jesus into the world of politics? and how people can find new ways of participating in governance inspired by the Gospel.

?Just with the word ?public service? you can already see the connection with the example of Christ,? he said.

Reporters asked him to comment on the pork barrel scam scandal.

?People do these things because the poor are absent from their minds and hearts. Maybe they can?t and don?t want to see them,? he said.

?I believe in the goodness of each person, so I?m appealing to that part of every person. You can be better than this. There is some goodness in you which comes from God. Let that good self of yours come out,? he said.

He started to invite the people involved in the scandals to visit squatter camps and homeless people in the night, but his voice broke, forcing him to pause before continuing. ?If you see by the sidewalk people opening cartons where they lie down to sleep, just touch their hand, maybe your heart will be moved ? hopefully.?

[N.J. Viehland writes for *NCR* from Manila.]

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