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WHAT CHURCH LEADERS ASK OF LOYOLA SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY*

2008 Graduation Remarks

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This, the ninth commencement exercise of Loyola School of Theology as an ecclesiastical faculty, takes place during two extraordinary series of events. The first, as you may have easily guessed, is the unfolding political crisis involving allegations of massive corruption in government. The second is the about-to-end 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus which elected its new Superior General and, therefore, now Chancellor of LST, Rev. Fr. Adolfo Nicolas, who spoke to us on more than one occasion and whom we remember with great affection.

In these brief remarks, I do not aim to do justice to these multi-faceted events which have their own specific character and trajectories. Allow me to touch upon them in order to help us understand better LST's mission of theological education as well as its goal in forming servants of the Word, be they ordained, religious, or lay. In particular, I will do an intertextual reading of our Holy Father's communications to the Jesuits at the congregation and the CBCP's pastoral letters on the present political crisis.

I turn first to Pope Benedict XVI's address to the congregation delegates when they visited him as it gives a concise but accurate description of the context of the congregation, namely, the

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contemporary situation which is likewise the location of LST's ministry. In his words,

> Your Congregation takes place in a period of great social, economic and political changes, sharp ethical, cultural and environmental problems, conflicts of all kinds, but also of a more intense communication among peoples, of new possibilities of acquaintance and dialogue, of a deep longing for peace.[1]

These words are echoed in our own bishops' letter issued last January which enumerates problems in Manila and the provinces: corruption in government, suspicions of martial law and politically partisan proposals for charter change, deterioration of peace and order as well as rising prices, neglect of the rural poor and abuse of natural resources, to name but a few.

Given such a context, the Church, meaning all of us as Christians and including LST as an institution in service of the Church, cannot and must not retreat. As the same letter further tells us, "we need to be aware of the deep resources of our faith in the Lord for whom all things are possible." In fact, the Pope's address adds that such conditions "challenge the Catholic Church and its ability to announce to our contemporaries the Word of hope and salvation." In the concrete, this entails

> a total and faithful adhesion to the word of God: adhesion first of all to Christ and to attentive listening to his spirit which guides the church; humble obedience to the Pastors whom God has placed to guide his people; and prudent and frank dialogue with the social, cultural, and religious appeals of our time.

The Church, therefore, needs

> people of solid and deep faith, of a serious culture and a genuine human and social sensitivity, of religious [and diocesan] priests [and lay leaders] who devote their lives to stand on those frontiers in order to witness and help to understand that there is in fact a profound harmony between faith and reason, between evangelical spirit, thirst for justice and action for peace.

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[1] *Papal Address to Members of Jesuit General Congregation*, http.//www.zenit.org/en/articles/papal-address-to-members-of-jesuit-general-congregation.

What this impresses upon us is that LST's ministry of theological formation, that is, "the task of facing and entering into a dialogue with very diverse social and cultural contexts and the different mentalities of today's world[,] is one of the most difficult and demanding." This search for quality and human competence, both spiritual and cultural, must characterize our formation and education for ministry. The Pope singles out some who have manifested extraordinary experiences of proclamation and encounter between the Gospel and the cultures of the world, such as Matteo Ricci in China, Roberto de Nobili in India, or those in the "Reductions" in Latin America.

Moreover, in undertaking this most difficult and demanding task, the Pope reminds us that we "must at the same time loyally fulfill the fundamental duty of the Church, of fully adhering to the word of God, and of the authority of the Magisterium to preserve the truth and the unity of the Catholic doctrine in its totality." What he refers to here are not only "the neuralgic points strongly attacked today by secular culture" "especially for those engaged in theological research, interreligious dialogue and dialogue with contemporary culture" but anything that compromises our radical and fundamental adherence to the word of God.

This adherence is exemplified in our bishops' second letter issued just last February 26, entitled "Seeking the Truth, Restoring Integrity."[2] Not a few, including some within the Church, were dismayed at the bishops' statement for what they perceived to be, at best, political naïveté or, at worst, moral cowardice on the part of the bishops. But as they rightly insist, "Today in the midst of restlessness and confusion, we come to you as pastors, for that is our precise role. We do not come as politicians whose vocation it is to order society towards the common good."

Moreover, they correctly distinguish between the different roles of pastors from those of lay people, whose task it is to evangelize the temporal order, and between the Church-based groups and others—

[2]Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, "Seeking the Truth, Restoring Integrity," http.//www.cbcpwebsite.com/2000s/2008/seeking.html.

distinctions so basic in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. They ask communities of faith to pray together, reason together, decide together, act together—always on the basis of the Faith and in union with the Church. For the long term, they reiterate the call for "circles of discernment" at the grassroots level, in our parishes, Basic Ecclesial Communities, recognized lay organizations and movements, religious institutions, schools, seminaries, and universities. Their letter also invites all citizens who have a concern for the nation to reflect together in all manner of associations, and to look upon themselves to see if in their actuations the demands of the common good are in fact captive to merely personal and selfish interests. And if they are, can they rise up to the challenge and decide [for] themselves to contribute to the general effort.

Today I feel I have the duty to exhort you to follow in the footsteps of your predecessors with the same courage and intelligence, but also with as profound a motivation of faith and passion to serve the Lord and his Church. All the same, while you try to recognize the signs of the presence and work of God in every part of the world, even beyond the confines of the visible Church, while you endeavor to build bridges of understanding and dialogue with those who do not belong to the Church or who have difficulty accepting its position and message,

> Loyola School of Theology is a Jesuit and Filipino institution and community of learning dedicated to formative theological education and research within the Catholic tradition. It is responsive to contemporary ecclesial and social concerns for the building up and service of the Church in the Philippines and in neighboring countries.

Through its inculturated courses, programs, and institutional and human resources, the mission of Loyola School of Theology is to educate in the faith, sustain personal theological growth, and assist in [the] effective empowerment of all who desire to serve God's people by ministries in and of the Church. It labors so that the members of its academic community may become academically competent, spiritually well-grounded, and apostolically motivated for Christian discipleship, renewed evangelization, social transformation, and responsible stewardship of the earth.