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CLERICAL POWER*

2011 Graduation Remarks

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Rites of passage, no matter how simple, make us realize everything that has gone into [their] making. Take today's graduation. We are thankful for Ms. Josephine Sanares' prayerful invocation, valedictorian Carlo Tinio's heartfelt address, our Vice-Chancellor and Jesuit Provincial Fr. Jose Cecilio Magadia's inspiring words, and the detailed preparations of Dean Fr. Enrico Eusebio and Executive Secretary Fr. Eric Genilo with the LST staff. But beyond today and far more lasting lie the day-to-day teaching of faculty and support of administration and staff. Still of greater weight and consequence is the human, religious, and pastoral formation in community that the different houses of formation offered.

But rites of passage also point forward, and for practically all of the graduates of our ecclesiastical baccalaureate, this specifically refers to ordination to the priesthood. Allow me then to address you graduates of Class 2011 as candidates for priestly ordination, to speak to you about a matter more valuable than the millions some AFP generals received as "commission." In so doing, I do not ignore the presence of lay people here but precisely bring that presence into the heart of the matter.

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Some of you are already in the midst of preparing for ordained ministry in the Church as diocesan or religious priests. With your ordination, you will have, in the words of the Council of Trent, "the power of consecrating, offering, and administering his [the Lord's] body and blood, and likewise the power of remitting and of retaining sins,"[1] and thus you will be marked with an indelible and singular character.

You would have studied in Fr. Vic de Jesus' and Bishop "Chito" Tagle's course on Holy Orders the historical context as well as the theological import of these words, and though the Second Vatican Council as well as later magisterial documents have put the presbyterate within the wider horizon of ecclesial ministry, these sacred powers remain the most visible sign of what distinguishes you from lay people.

This matter of clerical power lurks behind newspaper spreads and television screens in relation to the two-most talked about issues involving the Church today. First, sexual abuse by clerics with its usual subsequent cover-up. Therapists and pastoral care-givers of [victims]/ survivors of sexual abuse, as well as those who monitor its aftermath, underline that sex abuse is not about sex, though this is what media makes of it, but about power, more specifically about the power differential between the cleric and the lay. This difference in power comes starkly and simply from the office of being a cleric. This is not the fault of clerics as a group or as individuals; it is simply the systemic by-product of history and culture which any cleric must be constantly aware of and hopefully strive to change. Once forgotten, denied, or conflated with real or illusory personal qualities, qualifications, or charisma, this power turns dangerous.

The other burning issue that implicates clerical power is—you guessed it—the proposed reproductive health bill in the Philippine legislature. Regardless of what position one takes on this issue, one cannot deny that much disrupting static in the discussion is related to clerical power—whether actual or perceived, on the part of both

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[1]Josef Neuner & Jacques Dupuis, eds., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 6th rev. and enlarged ed. (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1996), chap. 1.

advocates and opponents of the bill. Some clerics sound as if their views should prevail simply because they are clerics, threatening the pain of sin or the denial of Communion. A proponent of the bill disrupted Mass by displaying the name of Padre Damaso, the consummate icon of clerical abuse in Rizal's novel *Noli me tangere*. Against all this, the "Talking Points" essay written by Frs. Joaquin Bernas, John Carroll, and Eric Genilo and drawn from legal, sociological, and moral perspectives is an effort to create space for discussion without the static of clerical power.

My dear graduates, if I speak to you about issues you are familiar with, it is because they are not questions external to your world but ones that are related and internal to what you are to become as ordained ministers. And thus they ask not only that you be aware of the power that comes with your office, but that you use that power, as Thesis 21 of the New Comprehensive Sheet expresses, "at the service of communion." What this could mean in the concrete may be indicated by the practice of transparency and accountability.

First, transparency. Church officials are rightly uncomfortable with the notion of transparency if it means the loss of confidentiality. The confidentiality between a pastor and a parishioner must certainly be guarded against all and any intrusion. But in matters that have to do with his leadership of the Christian community, the pastor must be transparent with regard to the basic aims, policies, and processes affecting the community. For instance, basic information of parish finances should not be a closely-guarded secret known only to the parish priest and perhaps God, even as we strongly affirm that the Church is not a corporation liable to its stockholders.

Second, accountability. Church officials may similarly be uneasy with the idea of accountability, since we hold that all, cleric and lay alike, are ultimately accountable to God alone. Moreover, the Church is not, and can never be, a democracy, notwithstanding attempts to make it one through false interpretations of what the *sensus fidelium* means. But at the same time, the priest must be accountable to the people, responsible to and for them.

I suggest the practice of transparency and accountability not because they are sound organizational practices but because they are profoundly characteristic of Jesus' preaching and ministry. Did he not often exhort his disciples "to bring everything to light" and to be "faithful and wise stewards"?

The misuse of clerical power through the lack of transparency and accountability has often subverted the faith of our people. Yes, clerics, like all humans, are not perfect, and yes, the people's faith should not be tied to the person of the priest. But we must also realize that the priest has been traditionally and appropriately—though not to the exclusion of the lay—described as *alter Christus* [another Christ], patterned after One "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (Phil. 2:6–7).

It may be auspicious that we speak of power at this time when we have just witnessed in Japan's unimaginable earthquake and tsunami not only human powerlessness before nature but also the power of selflessness for service among people and nations. We continue to be one with those perished and suffering, mindful of God's power on the Cross.

My dear graduates, we congratulate you on your completion of your ecclesiastical degree and look forward to your priestly ordination. We pray that with God's grace, you will apply all your powers to the service of all people for the love of God. Amen.