

## **Public Lives**

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### **Faith in new beginnings**

Considering how almost every major event in our nation's political life since 1972 has led to more problems, we may wonder why we hope that another presidential election might produce anything different. The answer lies, I think, in our people's inexhaustible faith in new beginnings. It is our most important source of strength. We may be fatalistic in the sense that we believe in fate, but pessimism has never been part of our culture.

Faith in new beginnings is what sustains more than eight million of our people who must live and work in unfamiliar settings, away from their loved ones. They are not afraid of what the future will bring, nor are they ever unsure if they can keep their promise to return, because of this faith. So long as they do not harm others and so long as they live by honest means, they know that no injury will befall them. We do not retreat from the uncertainty of new encounters; we plunge into the unknown with the boldness of "Bahala na." We pick our way through the minefield of many cultures with the confidence of one who has known the map of the human soul.

It is also this faith that gives us the capacity to forgive and to make promises. We are not a vengeful people. Of the rare deeds we cannot forgive, we usually say, "Diyos na ang bahala" (God will take care of them.) The Last Judgment is not a power we ascribe to ourselves. We are the characters in Hannah Arendt's world, for whom forgiving and dismissing are necessary "in order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly."

I bring up these thoughts in relation to President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's recent proposal for a general amnesty in the spirit of reconciliation and healing. There is enough soil in our culture in which to nurture such a proposal. Forgiveness is not alien to us. But forgiveness is an unusual concept in political and legal theory, where the central concept is justice, and the punishment, retribution, and

reparation it entails. So long as we cannot get away from the language of the law, like those who have warned the president of a possible violation of the Constitution, it would be difficult to break the cycle of vengeance and retribution.

The flaw in Ms. Macapagal's initiative is its timing. It is occurring at the end of her term rather than at the beginning, and it is being communicated not as the closing act of a magnanimous government, but as a calculated move to win re-election. In her hands, the offer of forgiveness acquires a sinister quality. It is greeted with cynicism rather than awe.

But, were it not for this, Christmas would indeed be a perfect time for forgiveness. "The discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth," Arendt reminds us. More than the power to perform miracles, it was Jesus' claim to the power of forgiveness that amazed the people around him. He claimed this power not as God but as man. "Man in the gospel is not supposed to forgive because God forgives and he must do 'likewise,' but 'if ye from your hearts forgive,' God shall do 'likewise'." Truly, this is, as Arendt sees it, a radical formulation.

In Christianity, the duty to forgive resides in the belief that human beings know not what they do. Arendt gives this philosophy a secular spin by situating it within her notion of the irreversibility and unpredictability of the process of human action. We cannot undo things; the cure available is forgiveness. Nor can we predict the future, and so we create spaces for certainty by making and keeping promises. This, Arendt says, is the condition of human relationships.

"Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever.... Without being bound to the fulfillment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man's lonely heart -- a darkness which only the light shed over the public realm through the presence of others, who confirm the identity between the one who promises and the one who fulfils, can dispel."

It has been 17 years since we filed the cases against Ferdinand Marcos and his associates. The process has yielded some money and properties, declared to be ill-gotten, for the national treasury. But so far as I know, none of these cases has established anything conclusive about the guilt or innocence of Marcos, his cronies or his key military officials. No one has been punished, except the military underlings who were convicted for the murder of Ninoy Aquino. It's also been almost 3 years since Joseph Estrada was removed from office and charged with plunder. What he did pales in comparison with the Marcos crimes. He is detained, awaiting the conclusion of his trial, which may never come.

We have not punished, and neither have we forgiven. Maybe, Arendt was right: "Men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable." The latter go beyond the realm of human affairs. They belong to the category of "radical evil," about which little is known. The Holocaust might be an example. But I do not know of any comparable crime in our nation's history that we cannot forgive. "A child has been born unto us." That is always a new beginning.

Merry Christmas, dear readers and friends!

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