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The Flor Contemplacion syndrome

Many reasonable people do not understand why the resources of the entire Filipino nation have been mobilized to persuade China to spare the lives of the three Filipinos who were executed yesterday for the heinous crime of drug trafficking. They ask: why are we spending precious diplomatic capital to plead for the lives of three convicted criminal offenders? Are we not being selfish in thinking only of our own nationals? Can we not also sympathize with the nameless individuals whose lives have been ruined by the drugs regularly brought into China by drug mules?

There is no way of answering these questions except by referring to the obligations of solidarity.

Among us Filipinos, it is difficult to imagine anything more compelling and more important than the family ties that bind us. It is for family that our workers venture abroad in search of work, uprooting themselves from everything that has nurtured them. Only the thought of an early return eases the pain of separation. In the meantime, they try to keep relationships intact by the steady flow of remittances and balikbayan boxes.

Yet we all know what our OFWs must give up throughout the long absence. They take care not to dwell on this lest they break down. They have to be strong for the family. But no matter how well they repress it, it surfaces as guilt. They feel guilty for leaving their loved ones behind. And their loved ones, in turn, feel guilty for allowing them to go and for letting them carry the whole burden of keeping the family alive.

In other words, they recognize each other's pain, and, more than that, they share one another's guilt. That is the essence of solidarity. These

are not contractual obligations. They are not voluntary, and do not arise simply from the need to repay the good that is done to us. Such are family obligations. They have a moral claim on us even when a parent or a child or a spouse has been wayward.

Indeed the obligations of solidarity go beyond the family. They make their presence felt in the special affinities we feel for members of our community, our ethnic group, our nation, and our people. Thus, to the extent that we Filipinos imagine ourselves as one big family whose members, by force of circumstances, have found themselves drifting to all four corners of the world, we are commanded by a sense of solidarity to care what happens to them. To be indifferent is to exclude oneself from the community. That is why the need to manifest solidarity is felt most strongly by those who are presumed to represent us – our religious leaders, government officials, politicians, and the mass media.

The failure of the nation's leaders to recognize and to identify with this communal obligation can trigger explosions of collective resentment sometimes bordering on irrationality. Still etched on the nation's collective memory is the figure of Flor Contemplacion, a domestic helper, whose conviction for murder culminated in her execution by the Singaporean government in 1995.

The public anger over the failure of the Philippine government to get the Singaporeans to delay her execution and to re-open her case caused a crisis in the presidency of Fidel V. Ramos. He had to recall the ambassador to Singapore, and fire the secretary of labor and the secretary of foreign affairs in order to appease the anger in the streets. A few months later, the Contemplacion syndrome gripped the nation all over again when Sarah Balabagan, a young Filipino Muslim girl working as a domestic helper in the United Arab Emirates, was sentenced to death for the killing of her employer who tried to rape her. The government, chastened by the virulence of this syndrome, did everything to save Balabagan from execution, and this time its efforts paid off.

The Contemplacion case became a watershed in our nation's history as a labor-exporting country. Every succeeding administration found itself haunted by the same syndrome. It created a special sensitivity about OFW matters that made it an undeclared State policy to do everything humanly possible wherever and whenever the lives of OFWs are in danger. This policy led to the withdrawal of Filipino troops from Iraq in order to save a Filipino worker from his Iraqi abductors. It is this same policy that today commits the government to respond decisively to any OFW request for immediate repatriation from crisis-stricken areas like Libya and Japan. It is what prompts the Aquino government's spokesmen to choose their words very carefully when they try to explain what the government did to save Ramon Credo, Sally Villanueva, and Elizabeth Batain from execution. Of course, one wishes we were not merely reacting to crises but actively restructuring our economy and re-orienting our culture so that our people would no longer find it necessary to go abroad just to earn a living.

In many ways, the moral responsibility we feel for our OFWs, including those who have been convicted for crimes abroad, is our way of making amends for our shortcomings as a people. A modern liberal and individualist account of obligations will not understand that. It will merely highlight the fact that going abroad to work is voluntary, and that every person must take responsibility for what he consents to do. But, solidarity is different. The obligations it creates, says the philosopher Michael J. Sandel, arise "from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are – as members of this family or nation or people; as bearers of that history; as citizens of this republic."

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