

AMRSP SOLIDARITY STATEMENT FOR MAYOR AQUINO'S DEATH, BLOODY SUNDAY, AND THE RURAL MISSIONARIES OF THE PHILIPPINES

[Association of Major Religious Superiors Philippines]

We hoped for peace, but no peace came. We hoped for a time of healing, but found only terror.' – Jeremiah 8:15

What is happening in our land?

Violence continues to spiral uncontrollably and with such impunity in our beloved land. So much pain and anguish, hatred and division have afflicted our peoples and nation that we seem indifferent to these deadly events happening in our midst.

The spate of attacks on lawyers, social activists, media practitioners, human rights defenders and church people bear one indelible mark – it is meant to intimidate, harass, malign and snuff out dissent and freedoms of speech, assembly and association. It is meant to constrict democratic debates and shrink the civic space for social engagements and activism.

The toll on lives, well-being and ultimately a democratic way of life have been devastating. The culture of death and impunity have not stopped to reign in our society. Instead, the power of the gun now reign supreme. Violence has devoured whatever civility, morals, and values we hold dear in our society.

Every day, more and more suspected drug addicts and pushers and perceived rebels and members of the CPP-NPA in their wars against addiction and terrorism are victimized by violence perpetrated by state agents, without even establishing their guilt through just and impartial investigations, without due process. Life has become so cheap. Shortcuts to dispensing justice has become the norm.

On Mayor Aquino's death

On March 8, another life was taken away by state forces. Hon. Ronaldo P. Aquino, Mayor of the City of Calbayog, together with his companions, was killed in an alleged "shoot-out" with forces of the Philippine National Police (PNP). The late mayor's family and Rep. Edgar Sarmiento of the First District of Samar believed that what happened was clearly an "ambush" based on the testimonies of the witnesses.

To quote the statement of Bishop Isabelo Abarquez of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Calbayog after the deaths of Mayor Ronaldo Aquino and his companions, "The taking of human life and inflicting of injury and suffering on anyone, whether as an act of aggression or to sow fears in the hearts and lives of people, can never be justified."

On the case of Otto de Vries

A long time lay missionary, Otto de Vries, has been ordered to leave the country for allegedly having links with “terrorist groups.” Mr. de Vries has been in the Philippines for more than thirty years working with the poor sections of society especially the workers. His permanent visa was cancelled allegedly because of his participation in “political rallies.” Otto de Vries is from the Diocese of Rotterdam in the Netherlands and came to the Philippines as an act of solidarity. He was with the Prelature of Infanta under the late Bishop Julio Labayen.

On the Bloody Sunday Incident

On March 7, we woke up to a very disturbing and unnerving news. Nine activists and community organizers, all from the provinces of the Southern Tagalog region, were killed in cold blood by state forces in the wee hours of the morning, while six were arrested and are now facing trumped-up charges. Among them is an elderly para-legal whose son is also a political prisoner. According to the narratives of witnesses to these ghastly events, a common sequence seems to emerge: the state forces come hours after midnight, without uniforms, bearing search warrants for alleged firearms and explosives hidden within their homes or offices, so-called “evidences” were “found,” then the persons they’re arresting were killed because “nanlaban.”

Regarding the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines (RMP)

RMP, the oldest of the mission partners of the Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines (AMRSP), was established in 1969 in response to the call of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences to serve Christ and to bring His loving and saving presence to the rural poor in the countryside, who are often victims of exploitation and landlessness.

For more than 50 years, RMP remained faithful to its mandate received from the AMRSP: to serve Christ in the rural poor, through various projects and pastoral ministries aimed at empowering rural communities where they serve. As a consequence of their steadfast commitment to the mission, RMP often was at the receiving end of countless harassments from people in power for many years. And now, another cross was added to their burden when the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) revoked their SEC Registration and the Anti-Money Laundering Council (AMLC) froze all their bank accounts and assets for “financing terrorist activities,” thus affecting the ministries and the daily operations of RMP.

As we have said in our previous statements, we stand in solidarity with RMP and other human rights defenders who are facing various forms of persecution for voicing out the truth and remaining true to their mission to defend the rights of “the least, the last, the lost, and the forgotten” of the society. We renew our call to revoke the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 that is being used as a vendetta against cause-oriented organizations, church institutions, critics, and basically anyone by accusing them as “terrorists,” “communists,” and “rebels.”

Our call and prayer

As religious and as followers of Christ we cannot remain silent as death and destruction stalk our land. We cannot turn a blind eye to the almost daily violence occurring in our midst. We cannot remain deaf to the cries of the families of the victims. We cannot turn our backs to the plight of the imprisoned and maligned.

Our hearts bleed with each loss of life. Our entire being is shaken by these continuing bloodbath and the culture of impunity it has engendered.

This is not the Lord's way. It is not the path to peace, justice and progress.

What we witness today is the reign of violence, intolerance, hatred and division. We are sure this is the handiwork of the devil himself. We cannot shirk our duty to combat evil in our midst. As prophetic witnesses we continue to denounce this blatant disregard for the dignity and value of human life. Each and every Filipino deserves to live regardless of his/her standing in society. Each and every Filipino deserves to share ideas and opinions without fear of death or intimidation. We ask all Catholics, Christians of other denominations, people of other faiths and all peoples of goodwill - let us stem the tide of violence and hatred in our homes, in our workplaces, in our streets, in the halls of governance, in our society.

We also ask all the police and military forces who are Catholics to fast and abstain from doing violence in this Season of Lent and beyond.

Peace we cry out! Justice we demand!

Lastly, to quote St. Oscar Romero, martyr for social justice, on his last homily "May this Body immolated, and this Blood sacrificed for humans nourish us also, so that we may give our body and our blood to suffering and to pain – like Christ, not for self, but to impart notions of justice and peace to our people."

May we, consecrated women and men, remain faithful to be the face of Christ, and continue to "hold the line."

March 12, 2021

Friday of the Third Week of Lent

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