

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES: Segment 2

Work Ethics and the Dignity of Labor, Part 1
A Commentary by Ildefonso J. Rubrico

Introduction

Good evening! Welcome once again to **Biblical Perspectives**, your socio-biblical commentary on the "burning issues of the day." This is your host and commentator, Nene Rubrico.

In a previous segment, we discussed the nature and purpose of this TV program. We said that in this program, we will share with you certain, important, insights from the Bible and apply them to our current, contemporary situation in the world today. Our purpose in "contemporizing biblical truths" into the events and situations that we find ourselves today, is, three-fold, namely: (i) to lead to a better understanding of ourselves; (ii) to improve our relationship with each other as fellow-human beings; and, (iii) to connect with God in a spiritual way in order that His eternal Truths become increasingly relevant to us as we face the difficult challenges of our own times.

And, as to how we can accomplish this 3-fold purpose, we likened our program to that of a pilot laboratory where we subject the issues of the day - social, economic, political, ethical - to a critical examination, using the Bible primarily as a "pseudo-scientific" tool. From such scrutiny, we hope to be able to extract insights and meanings that are found in the Bible but are not readily recognizable as such to the secular mind.

As a collection of books that covers a wide variety of topics, personalities, countries, and even, cultures, the Bible is *unique* among the so-called "sacred books" of the major religions of the world, in that it tells

the stories of ordinary men and women whom God has called, to do *extraordinary* things. In the Bible, God has weaved, within the fabric of the lives of these ordinary men and women, a pattern of Divine intent and purpose that is eternally relevant for all times and ages.

Last time I mentioned that we will be discussing for today the topic, "*Work Ethics and the Dignity of Labor*." I would like to break down this topic further into a sub-topic, formulated into a question:

WHY DOES JUAN/MARIA WANT TO WORK ABROAD?

I also mentioned last time that more and more Filipino workers and employees find themselves at a disadvantage at the local workplace. And I said that this has something to do primarily with the low compensation that they get. Why is this so? Let's review some economic facts.

Philippine Economic Facts: A not-so-encouraging Picture

With a population of almost 84 million in 2004 and growing at an annual rate of 2.3 percent, the Philippine labor force likewise has been growing at the same average rate (2.2%) since 1996. This means that there will be 1.9 million *more* mouths to feed and about 1.85 million *more* Filipinos will enter the workforce this year. The question is, are there going to be available any jobs for this sizable number of entrants into the Philippine labor market, so that they can start earning enough to feed these new babies?

Pres. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has publicly acknowledged that the primary thrust of her administration is job-creation and poverty alleviation. Indeed this has been the thrust of every administration since the days of Manuel Roxas in 1947. Otherwise, a burgeoning population without a steady means to feed itself will

only result in poverty, more poverty, and eventually, social unrest and chaos for the country. But, in order to create jobs, the Philippines must *grow* in economic terms. A good measure of economic growth is **GDP** - Gross Domestic Product, defined as the sum total of goods and services produced in the Philippines, usually expressed in percentage terms, or, GDP Annual Rate. The tandem of sustained economic growth, population control and poverty alleviation has been universally recognized by economic and government planners as the key to national survival and prosperity. Now the question may be asked: How has the Philippines been doing in this area? How is it doing *compared* to other Asian countries?

Despite it's fair growth in GDP terms(4.4% in 2002), the Philippines remains behind some Newly-Emerging Asian economies like Thailand (GDP 5.4%), Vietnam (7%) and China (8%). The Poverty Index (the percentage of the population below the national poverty line) is 28% for the Philippines in 2002, according to World Bank statistics, although this figure has been declining since 1998, citing Philippine government estimates. An article datelined Manila and dated April 30,2004 appearing in the *Strait Times* of Singapore says that the Philippines needs at least a *decade of growth at an average GDP rate of 6%* just to catch up with its more-affluent neighbors, according to senior officials of the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Therefore, in its present economic state, the Philippines has a *lot of catching up* to do with its Asian neighbors. We are very much behind other Asian economies.

Looking at the problem in another way, how does the Philippines fare on a *per capita income* basis in comparison with other Asian countries? Per Capita Income is a more-accurate way of measuring income because it takes into account the gross national income *divided* by its population. Let's listen to what industrialist John Gokongwei Jr. told the graduating students of Ateneo de Manila University during the Commencement Exercises last March 27, 2004:

"Twenty years ago, the per capita income of the Filipino was 1,000 US dollars. Today, it's 1,100 dollars. That's a growth of only ten percent in twenty years. Meanwhile, Thailand's per capita income today is double ours; Malaysia, triple ours; and Singapore, almost twenty times ours."

I should add that the Philippines stands somewhat better off than some of the "poorer" countries of South Asia, like Indonesia and Bangladesh. On the other hand, the Philippines stands also quite a distant from its "richer" neighbors (as Mr. Gokongwei mentions above) and from the really affluent, like the U.S. and Japan. The *Country Data Profile for 2002* prepared by the World Bank Group lists the following selected data :

The World Bank Group Country Data Profile for 2002

Source-<http://devdataworldbank.org/external/CPProfile.asp>

Country	Pop. Tot.	Pop. Growth	Per Capita Income(USD)	GDP Growth
Philippines	80M	2.1%	1030	4.4%
Thailand	62M	0.7%	2000	5.4%
Malaysia	24M	2.1%	3540	4.1%
Indonesia	212M	1.3%	710	3.7%
Bangladesh	136M	1.7%	380	4.4%
Vietnam	81M	1.2%	430	7.0%
China	1.3B	1.7%	960	8.0%
India	1.0B	1.6%	470	4.6%
South Asia	1.4B	1.7%	460	4.3%
Singapore	4.2M	0.8%	20690	2.2%
Hongkong-China	6.8M	0.9%	24690	2.3%
South Korea	48M	0.6%	9930	6.3%
Australia	20M	1.3%	19530	2.7%
Japan	127M	0.1%	34010	0.3%

U.S.A.

288M

1.1%

35400

2.4%

It has often been pointed out that the Philippines is so like Thailand in many respects. If so, then that country has now OVERTAKEN us economically and is well on its way to being a "tiger economy" by this decade. Incidentally, the last time the Philippines attained "Baby Tiger" status was during the last year or so of Pres. Ramos, when the economy grew around 5.5% GDP. From 1998 down, it plunged back to the 3.8-4.5% range wherein the blame was placed on the so-called "Asian Currency Crisis" that started in Thailand and subsequently affected the entire Asian economy, including Japan's - according to a number of local and international economists. Since then, almost all the Asian economies have recovered (including Thailand). Only the Philippine economy, unfortunately, has remained in doldrums, in limbo, near the bottom of the economic ladder.

And there seems to be no end to this "scare scenario" concerning the Philippine economy. Just recently, *Businessworld* covered a forum sponsored by the Philippine Economic Society in Makati where former Finance Secretary Isidro Camacho spoke of a monumental fiscal crisis when he "warned that the country was suffering from a fiscal crisis, with government debt beyond manageable levels and a political system that could not bring it down nor keep it in check." ("RP now in fiscal crisis," a *Businessworld* article by Eric Boras).

I have been to a number of these Asian countries in the past two years and there is much truth to this assertion. Actually seeing with your own eyes all those progress going on in other shores, it makes you want to cry sometimes for our beloved Philippines - it's rather unfortunate for us. Perhaps in another program segment we can further discuss the Philippine economy. It's

such an interesting and absorbing topic that could take several hours of our time. But back to our main topic, which is "the rationale of working abroad."

In his speech, Mr. Gokongwei further urged his Ateneo audience to become entrepreneurs like himself. Gokongwei is a Chinese-mestizo, a self-made man who lost his father when he was only 13 years old, and was left to fend for himself as the war broke out, selling anything his bike could carry to the public market - thread, soap, candles - to support a growing family. Eventually, he moved to Manila where he started a (in his own words) "*the first ukay-ukay*" used-textile business. Later, he saw an opportunity to sell his own coffee brand and this started him on the road to the "big-time." Today, 63 years later, his huge business empire has expanded: "*from one market stall*(again, in his own words), *we are now in nine core businesses—including retail, real estate, publishing, petrochemicals, textiles, banking, food manufacturing, airline and cellular phones.*"

But while Gokongwei has chosen his path well by becoming a successful entrepreneur, still, not everyone can be like him. In our country, most people will embark on a career as an employee or a hired worker - with half (about 54%) being employed in the Services sector, a third (around 31%) going to Industry-Manufacturing, and the rest (15%) to Agriculture.¹

From these it would appear that the Philippines does not have a serious problem with jobs for its citizens. Nevertheless even these figures can be misleading. According to the *Strait Times* article cited above, up to 11% of the labor force is jobless and as much as 17% is under-employed due to a number of reasons, such as: slowdown in the economy, scarcity of jobs, closure of companies because of high cost of operation, or lack of market for its products. Labor problems were sometimes blamed for the company's inability to operate. There simply are no work available for many of our new

graduates and even for those who have jobs sometimes have not choice but to accept work that is well below their skills and qualifications.

No wonder then that we find many of our compatriots seeking employment abroad. The Foreign Affairs Department reports that as of December 2003, there were 5.345 million Filipinos documented as working abroad, with over half a million more working illegally.²

The case of the more than four million land-based OFWs (overseas Filipino workers) working in the Middle East, in Taiwan, and all over the world; the one million-strong Filipino seamen aboard foreign vessels; and the 150,000 DHs (Domestic Helpers) - mostly women - scattered in such places as Hongkong, Singapore, Canada, and Europe, are well-documented. Japan alone has 74,000 Filipino entertainers employed there. This is not to mention the steady "brain-drain" our country has been experiencing since the 1970s when many of our professionals opted to work abroad - engineers, teachers, doctors, nurses, physical therapists. Even "care-giving" of the elderly and the sick in the more-advanced countries like Canada - long the domain of the less-skilled - has attracted many of our Filipino professionals who have become more adventurous (desperate, even) to earn a little more for themselves and their families in distant shores.

As a gauge to the speed with which our "kababayans" are leaving the country, last year *BusinessWorld*, a business daily paper, reported that our Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) printed about 800,000 new passports - good for about a year's supply. Within six months, the DFA had to S.O.S. for assistance from the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP), urgently asking the latter to have an additional 500,000 passports specially printed for it (at its printing facility that uses special security paper), because the DFA was running short of passports - having, at one time, to issue new passports to the tune of 5,000 to 7,000 a

day. According to DOLE figures, about 3,000 of our "kababayans" leave the country daily, 7 days a week. In a year, that's almost a MILLION workers deployed!

One only has to take a look at the long lines of people queueing at the DFA entrance along Roxas Boulevard everyday to realize how large a number of Filipinos badly want to leave their native land for distant shores abroad. These long, waiting lines of humanity are replicated everyday at the offices of the National Statistics Office (NSO) in East Avenue, Q.C., the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) at Morayta, Manila, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) along Edsa-Ortigas Ave., and the MARINA at Manila South Harbor. And finally, we should include in this list those multitude of visa applicants lining up at dawn at the U.S. embassy in Roxas Boulevard, the Japanese Consulate a few kilometers away, and the various embassies and consulates of Australia, and the E.U. countries in Makati and Ortigas Center.

The question is: What benefits, if any, accrue to the economy of the Philippines by the large and continuing outflow of OFWs from our shores?

There is *much* to commend about our compatriots seeking better employment opportunities in other countries. Aside from offering a solution to the acute local employment problem of the government, in practical terms, these OFWs (hailed by our government as 'Ang Mga Bagong Bayani' or The New Heroes) remit a substantial amount of foreign exchange to the coffers of the government. The Labor department reports that the number of Filipinos who left the country to work overseas fell 3% from a year earlier to 865,000 in 2003. But their remittances actually increased 4.5% to \$6.9 billion - about P386 billion - roughly the equivalent of our national government budget last year. Many economists say official remittance figures are

understated and that even larger amounts are sent home through unofficial channels.

Filipinos can be found working in over 100 countries, from caregivers in Europe, construction workers in the Middle East, domestic helpers and entertainers in East Asia and seamen in ships on all the oceans. These 5.3 million-strong "army" of Filipino OFWs located in practically all the countries of the world - from the searing heat of Jeddah and Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, to the war-ravaged countries of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kosovo; from the icy tundras of Norway to the darkened 'sing-a-long' bars of Japan and Thailand; from the airconditioned labs of Silicon Valley, California, to the salt-sprayed decks of an oil tanker plying the Atlantic Ocean on a stormy day - these unsung heroes continue to send their precious dollars to Mother Philippines: to feed the growing families, send the children to school and money for the shopping malls, pay for the hospitalization of the old folks, buy the house-and-lot and latest appliances, invest in jewelry or on some pyramid scheme that a quick operator managed to foist on some stay-home housewife; or just to save away a portion for that proverbial "rainy day." Every year or so, they come home in droves - often loaded with 'greenbacks' and 'balikbayan' boxes. And they keep going back - by the planeloads. What drives these OFWs to keep going?

'Roderic Gandado endured a three-year stint working in the Middle East as a machinist, where he recalls the hot weather was tougher than the work, before returning to the Philippines.'

But after two years back in his homeland he is boarding a taxi to the airport, where he will catch a plane for a new two-year assignment to the volatile region.

"There are jobs here [in the Philippines] but they just aren't regular," he said, explaining his decision to

*endure more years of separation from his family to work abroad, like millions of other Filipinos.'*³

Indeed, without the dollar remittances of the hard-working OFWs, the government will literally be hard put to finance the workings of its massive machinery.

Working for Self and for the Government

Beyond the apparent need to work abroad in order to support the family's needs back home, what does the Bible say about the government and the obligations of its citizens to support the government? Why provide support to the government in the first place?

One of the things we learn from the Scriptures about the nature of governments is that it has a "public responsibility" - roughly defined as those "broad tasks of distribution and retribution for the sake of the entire community or society over which it governs."⁴ Examples of these tasks are found in Exodus 21, Leviticus 25, and Deuteronomy 24:1-22.

Biblically-speaking, the twin purpose of Civil government is to: "(a) to preserve social order (1 Tim. 2:2); and, (b) to restrain evil (Rom. 13:4)."⁵ Governments are called upon to look after the public health and general welfare of the whole society under a regime of justice, and, to prescribe and enforce punishment to those who would use force and violence against their neighbor.

In this sense, the government exercises a *stewardship* function over society - families, businesses, schools, associations, churches, and so on. Furthermore, both the 'governed' (or people) and the 'governing' (the officials, whether elected or appointed) is to be juxtaposed upon the framework of *human stewardship*, the means by which God wants to rule over His creation. (See, e.g. 1Peter 2:13-3:17; 5:1-7). These biblical

passages echoed in the book of Peter, in essence, exhorts all Christians to "*submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men.*" in a spirit of obedience to the Lord. All citizens, as individual *stewards*, are duty-bound to support their government.

In like manner, governments are to preserve and protect its citizens as the Lord commands. In the New Testament teachings government authority emanates from a *Higher Authority* - God's authority - and is exercised by human stewards under the watchful eyes of God. Thus, governments exercise stewardship, *in behalf of God*, over its citizens (John 18:33-37; 19:7-11; Rom. 13:1-7; Col.1:15-16; Rev. 11:15-19). As an example of this *higher authority*, in the mock trial of Jesus as recorded in the gospel of John, Jesus tells the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate that He, too, is a king whose "*kingdom is not of this world*" (John 18:36). And when Pilate tried to impress Him of Pilate's power of life-or-death over Him, Jesus reminded Pilate that "*you would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above,*" effectively silencing Pilate but secretly convincing him nonetheless (John 19:11).

Some OFWs I Personally Know

With a few exceptions, most of our OFWs are dedicated, talented, and serious about work. I have personally seen this strong dedication and commitment to work in the case of three of my wife's brothers-in-law, and my own brother, who are all OFWs. Except for my younger brother, who quit working abroad and now operates a successful business in Cavite with his wife, two of my wife's brothers-in-law are still boarding foreign vessels year-after-year - as seamen for the last 10 years or more. While they are home every year, they only stay a couple of weeks with their families, after which time they again board another vessel. The third brother-in-law teaches high school math and has a 3-

year contract with the State of New York. In a few weeks' time, his wife and children will be joining him in the U.S. as part of his employment package.

In the case of my relatives and of those who are closely acquainted to me, I have personally seen how these OFWs and their families benefited from the fruits of their labor and sacrifice, the material blessings so typical of many who have gone abroad to work.

The Perils of Working Abroad - the Other Side

There are, to be sure, "horror stories" that abound about many OFWs, some of whose family members (eg. the wife or husband, or children left behind) - the infidelities, the drug-addiction, the squandering away of the hard-earned money. But worse, the calamity itself may strike the OFW. Let's listen to one story of a former 'DH,' Naty (not her real name). This is found in "For Many Overseas Filipino Workers, Home is Where the Hurt Is" (at <http://www.pcij.org/stories/1999/ofws.html>).

Raped twice by her employer in Riyadh, Naty had sought the help of the OWWA (Overseas Workers Welfare Administration) Center after her escape from her master's household. Her OWWA case officer convinced her to make a deal with her abuser instead of filing a lawsuit. He did not tell her about OWWA's counseling services back home or its other reintegration programs.

Four months pregnant when she returned home, Naty has been jobless for the last two years, and has been barely making ends meet despite the modest support her family gives her and her child, aside from a small assistance from Kanlungan (an NGO helping abused women workers). The P50,000 settlement from her rapist has long been gone; she was never paid for the entire year that she worked in Riyadh. Naty says she had thought overseas employment would mean a better life for her. Today, however, the single mother who has a scant

elementary education faces an even greater burden than before she left. The OWWA tried to reintegrate her by referring her to two employment agencies but she was rejected as being too old at 29. And now the condition of this x-OFW is, to say the least, pitiful.

Naty's case squarely falls within the purview of the law which was passed in 1995, the *Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipino Act of 1995*, to protect the rights of our OFWs abroad and to provide a mechanism of reintegration when they come home or are rescued from abusive employers. And yet, this law has not benefited her, as had many others, in spite of the OWWA's claim.

But other stories are simply touching, as bitter-sweet as any "tele-novela" that you've seen on TV - this story I am about to relate to you:

I remember a time when my family and I were vacationing in Hongkong and we met a Filipina 'DH' (domestic helper) aboard a bus while we were on our way to Ocean Park. Sensing she was a Pinay, I immediately engaged her in a conversation. It turned out she was working for a French couple, the husband being a diplomat. For 15 years, she was "yaya" to the couple's only son, now newly-graduated from high school. Back home, in Pangasinan, she had been faithfully remitting money to her husband and their son, who, incidentally, also was fresh out of high school. Both her French ward and real son were of the same age, in fact.

For the next 15 years, she would faithfully come home to the Philippines every year to visit her family in Pangasinan and afterwards be back to Hongkong to work again. And she did this every year. That year that we met her, she told us that her boss, the French diplomat, would be getting another posting in another country and the couple wanted her to come with them. I asked her if she would go with them, and she answered in the affirmative, explaining that "napamahal na sa akin ang kanyang" ward - the French couple's son - whom

she had apparently 'adopted' as her own all these years from the time the child was still an infant. When she said this, she appeared happy with her decision, at least to us. Did she make the right decision? That, I cannot say as I do not have all the relevant facts about her case. The bus had already stopped at her destination and she had left us, perhaps forever.

But maybe we can still draw a biblical lesson here that's worth emulating: *the strongest of bonds that exists between a mother and her child*, very well illustrated in the apocryphal story of the two women who went to King Solomon, claiming that each was the real mother of the live baby, the baby of one of them having died in the night (1Kings 3:16-27). We all know how King Solomon was able to determine who the real mother of the live baby was, and justice was served by the fact that Solomon understood the depth of human emotion and correctly applied it to this case. Certainly, we should be the last to condone the actions of this 'DH' for having chosen to leave her biological son for another, for only the Lord knows her real reasons. Still, one cannot but be impressed by her *dedication* to duty, to her ward, whom she considers her own son! In the case of this Pinay DH, her *real* needs as a mother were being met in a most-unusual (if increasingly, common) way.

At this point, we shall take a break. When we come back, we shall continue to tackle some of the challenges faced by an overseas Filipino worker - as well as those planning to be OFWs - relating their experiences as well as their ordeals to the biblical examples and injunctions that we find here and there.

We close this program with a message. Remember:

"Where there is no vision, the people perish!"
(Proverbs 29:18a)

If portions of this work is quoted or used for study purposes, please cite source:
www.biblical-perspectives.org

Note & References:

- ¹ These data are from the World Bank website:
<http://www.worldbank.org/data/countrydata/countrydata.html>].
- ² See <http://www.asianlabour.org/archives/001293.html>).
<http://www.asianlabour.org/archives/001293.html>)
- ⁴ *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, op.cit., p. 517.
- ⁵ *Colossians Theme - Christianity & Politics: Part #1*
by Gary DeLashmutt. <http://nc16.org/page8a.htm>