

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES: Segment 3

Work Ethics and the Dignity of Labor, Part 2 A Commentary by Ildefonso J. Rubrico

Good evening once again. This is Nene Rubrico, your host on this program **Biblical Perspectives**.

Tonight, we shall continue our talk on some issues surrounding the work of OFWs, the handy label of those who work abroad (or are planning to), and endeavour to connect these issues to relevant Bible passages.

The Pros and Cons of Going Abroad

All this is well and good: the going abroad - the earning of the dollars; and the material prosperity that it brings to the overseas worker and his or her family; the foreign currency earnings badly-needed by the Philippine government to keep the economy going, and so on and so forth. These are the apparent benefits.

But at what *cost* to bear - for them and for our Philippine society - in allowing our people, our brightest and most-talented, to go abroad, where without a doubt the financial rewards are much, much greater than in the Philippines? In a recent speech, Fernando Aldaba, chairman of the economics department of the Jesuit-run Ateneo de Manila University, warned that the *social* costs of sending the country's top prospects overseas are incalculably high but "may not be immediately felt but may only be manifested in the medium and long term." The loss of skilled labor or "human capital" will hamper growth while the lengthy separation of

OFW parents from their families may result in greater social dysfunction, Mr. Aldaba stressed.

Harking back to the Old Testament times, the forced migration of the cream of Israelite society as recorded in 2 Kings 25 - its king and nobles, public officials, artisans, merchants, and priests - by the Babylonian conqueror Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. left ancient Israel destitute and a wasteland. It was not until 50 years later that a new king of Persia, King Cyrus, was enabled by the Lord - perhaps in a vision - to allow the Jews exiled in Babylon to again repopulate the deserted land of Israel (2 Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4). Still, it took several migrations, spanning more than 20 years, of thousands of willing Jews back to Israel to accomplish the purpose. In more recent times, the modern state of Israel was founded in 1948 when mass migrations of Jews from Europe and America converged once again on Palestine soil after an absence of almost 1900 years. Is the Philippines in danger of being de-populated by mass migrations, just like ancient Israel? I don't think so, but the parallels are quite interesting and food for thought.

Meanwhile, what if the services of these talented people - the professionals, especially - are also badly-needed here, locally, as in many of the actual cases in the rural and remote areas? What happens to the noble virtues of self-sacrifice and service to fellowman? Of volunteerism? Is it all going to be sacrificed in favor of the almighty dollar? What does the Bible say about all these?

Last week I was in Davao City attending a wedding, when I heard over the local radio the news about the problems of the regional health office of the Department of Health. It seems like the regional

health officials were alarmed over the lack of physical therapists, "PTs", in the hospitals of the region because many of their "PTs" have gone to work abroad. About a month ago also, the president of the Philippine Nurses Association was interviewed over local TV. She admitted that Filipino nurses were being recruited by the hundreds for assignments in the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Ireland, and Europe. Writing in *The Manila Times* last February 9, 2004, Dr. Patricia B. Gatbonton, in her article entitled "Doctors Work Abroad as Nurses" revealed that over 2,000 physicians enrolled in nursing courses last year. These were originally licensed medical doctors who took up nursing to gain entry into the nursing profession in many hospitals abroad. The reason she cited was that aging baby boomers are straining the healthcare system in developed countries, causing an acute shortage of nurses. In the US, the shortage is estimated to be 600,000 by 2010; in Japan, the nurse deficit will be 1.2 million. A BBC report says that over 17,000 Filipino nurses—the largest minority group—migrated last year to work in Britain.

How are we to rationalize this development?

At this point, please allow me to briefly relate the case of two young, highly-intelligent, idealistic, ambitious, Filipinos: two medical doctors, in fact. My treatment of their story here is that of a sketch, rather than a full-blown case study, merely for purposes of illustration of the points that I wish to later make. I have dubbed their episode with a fanciful title:

"STAYIN' AWAY, STAYIN' BEHIND, STAYIN' ALIVE!"

Theirs is the poignant, yet, familiar, tale of a brave Filipino - a real, honest-to-goodness hero of today - young, self-sacrificing and so full of idealism, mayhaps not exactly in the mold of a Jose Rizal or a Ninoy Aquino, but nonetheless a hero by the sacrifices they were willing to make. The first one is a recent medical board topnotcher, from one of the poorest provinces in the Philippines who wants to work in the U.S. as a *nurse!* The other - the storyteller - also a medical doctor - who chose to stay in the Philippines and built a career and medical practice, that - if I may say so myself - tried to beat the odds and succeeded, but not without a long struggle.

I came across their stories by way of the internet. It was first forwarded to me by a medical-doctor friend of mine, and it was rather urgently addressed to me as(quote) "*all doctors, please read this!*" By profession, I am not a medical doctor, but it did not surprise me that my physician-friend forwarded the story to me, perhaps because she knew that I would also pass the message on to my friends.

This is their story:

Dr. Michael Muin is a physician and founder/Editor-in-Chief of Pinoy.MD. He is a professor of Clinical Anatomy and Medical Informatics in Pangasinan. Last March 29, 2004 he wrote an article entitled "Filipino Doctors, Sacrificial Lambs" and had it posted at his website, www.pinoy.md.

He begins by introducing us to Dr. Elmer Jacinto -- the February medical board topnotcher who publicly announced his plans to work in the US as a nurse! The topnotcher guy is from Lamitan, Basilan, and immediately Muin feels an affinity, since his own

parents are from neighboring Zamboanga city. He sees Elmer Jacinto's situation and the reactions from various sectors as both funny and sad. He wonders what can the country offer its best and brightest in the medical profession? The short answer: *none*.

He deplores comparing the medical with the legal profession: there are no offers made to medical topnotchers unlike bar topnotchers, who are invited to join prestigious law firms. Medical board topnotchers are hardly remembered, so no wonder many of them have left the country.

But he admits there is public outcry over doctors who leave for abroad as doctors or nurses or caregivers. He agrees that the country *does* have something to offer the graduates of the "most noble profession:" the poor and sick of the Philippines. New physicians are expected to grab the opportunity to serve -- for a pittance of a fee, or even for free. Once, while looking for work, he volunteered his services to a local church, serving the urban poor of Malate once a week. In no time he had 10-15 patients per session and confessed he even had lots of fun.

But he also despaired for himself and for many of his poor patients who could not simply afford to buy the medicines. He wrote the local Parish but was told it had no money. The city government couldn't help him either. Finally the Rotary Club of Manila offered to provide him some funds, and that at least helped his patients a little.

He found it ludicrous how the public expects too much of a sacrifice from Filipino doctors, when it expects too little from its government officials. He particularly remembers a town executive who once

asked him to join a free medical mission he sponsored. Let's listen to Dr. Muin again, in his own words:

I humbly asked if there was any payment involved for my services. "Ah, eh, wala. Pero libre naman ang pagkain. Tapos ipapahiram ko naman yung Pajero ko at isa kong Starex para libre na rin yung transpo."

After reading Dr. Muin's anecdote we get the feeling that he is, in fact, taking the cudgels for young Dr. Elmer Jacinto, the migrating doctor/nurse - defending the younger doctor's decision to go abroad. Remember, this guy comes from a poor family in a backward, rebel-infested province and probably deserved something better for himself and his parents. Yet, we also detect Dr. Muin's personal misgivings about doctors who leave the country, and for good reason. There are *real* fears that the country is now losing its *best* and *brightest* to overseas job assignments where they will be paid as much as 10 times more than what they could get here. While the warnings have been sounded by social scientists like Dr. Fernando Aldaba of the ADMU, subsequent studies made by sociologists have examined the policies and directives of government administrations since Marcos, demonstrating how the "government actively promotes labor migration with provision for the welfare of the migrants often an afterthought." ["Overseas Filipino Workers, Labor Circulation in Southeast Asia, and the (Mis)management of Overseas Migration Programs," by Odine de Guzman. http://kyotoreview.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/issue/issue3/article_281.html].

On the other hand, this does not seem to faze the government. Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Romulo

Neri rejects the notion that the exodus is a sign that Filipinos have lost hope in their country. *"It's economics. It's not desperation. It is pure and simple economics,"* Mr. Neri said, crediting the higher salaries abroad for luring Filipinos away. Isidro Aligada, member of a special House of Representatives oversight committee on overseas workers who worked for 12 years in the Middle East himself, said it was not so much a government policy to send Filipinos overseas but rather the people themselves who were seeking work abroad.

"There are a lot of Filipinos [abroad] because Filipinos are the preferred workers," he says, citing their *"facility with English, their high level of skill and their ability to blend with other nationalities."*

If anything, the government has even provided fresh impetus to further the thrust of deploying more workers abroad. Ambassador Domingo Siazon, in his remarks during the Symposium for the Movement of Natural Persons in Tokyo, Japan, last March 19, 2003, had this to say:

"The Philippines has entered into bilateral, regional and multilateral arrangements to facilitate the promotion of labor mobility. To date, the Philippine Government has labor agreements with the Commonwealth of Northern Marianas Islands, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Qatar, Kuwait, Papua New Guinea, Norway, United Kingdom, Switzerland and Indonesia."

Two Types of Filipino Workers - Both Heroes

Framed against the background of a country struggling to free itself from its economic travails are two pictures of the Filipino worker - the first, the "stay-home" worker, in his day-to-day struggle to earn a decent living in his own country. Even of self-sacrifice. A certain type of hero to us.

What cannot be missed in Dr. Muin's testimony is his passion for service to fellowman, in the form of self-sacrifice and volunteerism - even if he so belittles it himself and is so humble about mentioning the fact. Looking back on his experience with volunteerism, he had this to say:

"My experience is not unique. Volunteerism doesn't have to be so obvious. Surgeons forego professional fees after operations, internists accept token consultation fees, pediatricians charge break-even, and general practitioners accept "in-kind" for services. These may be small acts, but they are by no means less heroic.

There are, of course, doctors who work with the poorest of the poor. Their dedication is a strong testament to their character. These doctors who work with the poor often become poor themselves, and I have nothing but the utmost respect and admiration for them."

Dr. Muin's decision to stay behind and do the utmost for his fellow countrymen can only be described as biblical love of highest order. Of self-sacrificing love, the bible has this to say in John 15:13 - "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Pope John Paul II, during his last visit to the Philippines a few years ago, repeatedly quoted 1 John 4:19 to his audience of millions of adoring Filipinos: "We love because God loved us first."

The other picture is that of a brave Pinoy or Pinay in a distant land, also struggling to earn a decent living: another type of hero to many. The story of the two physicians I have just presented, as well as of countless other Filipinos who have brought pride and honor to their country - while braving the loneliness, enduring separation from loved ones, and even suffering the break up of their families - represent both the *best and the worst conditions* for the Filipino worker. They are illustrative of the life of the Filipino worker in contemporary times. There is even a biblical dimension to all these, as found in Psalms 111:2-3, which asserts: "*the works of the Lord are great... and His work honorable and glorious*". In like manner the work of these OFWs and non-OFWs, are - from a biblical viewpoint - truly commendable and worthy of honor and praise.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this program we asked the question: "*Why does Juan/Maria want to work abroad?*" We have attempted to answer that question from the *secular* point of view - the need to multiply their earnings for themselves and for their families, often at great sacrifice for both parties. And we have also shown that the Philippine economy has greatly benefited from these labor migrations. We can now conclude this discussion by tying it up with a relevant thought from the Bible.

Jesus' Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30 relates to us the story a powerful man going on an important but long journey and who called his three trusted estate administrators/stewards together to entrust his riches to them while he was away. To

one he gave five thousand dollars, or 275,000 pesos (1 talent = one thousand dollars; NIV). To another, two thousand dollars or 110,000 pesos. And to the last, a thousand dollars or 55,000 pesos. It is important to note that he gave to each one "*according to his ability*" (Matt. 25:15, NIV), or, in the CEV of the Bible, the powerful man apportioned his wealth for safekeeping to each because "*the man knew what each could do.*" Please keep in mind the trustworthiness and ability factors here.

And so it was that in this familiar story, the man came back and asked his stewards for an accounting of his entrusted funds. The one who was entrusted the most, the holder of the \$5,000, reported that he invested the money wisely and now he doubled his master's money to \$10,000. The man was extremely pleased and profusely praised him and even placed him in charge of many other properties he had. The next likewise reported that, he, too, invested the \$2000 and now doubled it to \$4000. The master was very pleased with his stewardship and rewarded him with more responsibilities in his domain.

Finally, we come to the one who was entrusted with the least talent. Fearful of his master's strict reputation and of his own incompetence if he would lose his master's \$1000 and be punished, he instead *buried* the money in the ground, "just to be on the safe side," in a manner of speaking - or so he thought! Instead of being pleased that his money was still intact, this powerful man was so enraged at the poor steward's bad attitude and utter lack of initiative that he banished the guy from his household, "into the darkness, where people will cry and grit their teeth in pain." (CEV, v.330). And, not only that, but to his most-trusted lieutenant who was also the most-capable, the one

who gave back \$10,000 - to this most-faithful steward the master rewarded an *additional* \$1000 that was taken away from the incompetent steward. Jesus aptly states the verdict for the trustworthy person:

"Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matt. 25:21,23).

And to the lazy, worthless steward:

"You wicked and lazy servant!...Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness..." (vv. 26,28-30).

The Parable of the Talents makes the point that **one's talent, or talents, is a gift from God, who desires that they be utilized TO THE UTMOST, utilizing these gifts "in all diligence and honesty," for ultimately, they "serve God"** (*The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., edited by Walter A. Elwell, p.1295).

The crucial lesson we get from this parable is that, first, *each* of us have gifts and talents from God, not in equal portions, but in varying degrees and magnitude. And, that, in the final analysis, it is *how we make use* of these talents and gifts **FOR THE LORD** that ultimately determines whether we succeed or not in whatever endeavor we are in.

I must confess that it must be difficult for those of a secular, "non-religious" mind to comprehend how things being done by him or by others could be

done "for the Lord" or "to serve God." Certainly, it can be argued that, say, a bulldozer operator digging a canal in the 110F heat of an Iraq noonday sun, labors there because with his earnings he plans to buy a Tamaraw FX to be used as a taxi next year when he goes home - and not because "he is serving the Lord." Or, of a factory worker in Cagayan de Oro City piling those tin cases of processed pineapple unto waiting trucks, thinking what toys he'll buy his kids at the local mall next payday. Their thoughts are certainly mundane and not necessarily centered on God.

Still, the Bible makes the unequivocal claim that God intended man to work for His *glory* - man's motives notwithstanding! Genesis 2:15 says: "*The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden, to work it and take care of it.*" So, man was really destined to work from the very beginning, albeit in the pleasant and ideal surroundings of Paradise. But of course it did not end there. As it happened, after Adam and Eve were driven away from Eden, they were told by the Lord God in Gen. 3:19 - "*By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground.*" And also, Gen. 3:23 - "*So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken.*"

And so it has been ever since the dawn of history - man has unceasingly worked and worked and worked. And his industry has paid off. According to Phillip Yancey, in his book, "Finding God in Unexpected Places" (1997), the human species is distinctive in at least three ways, quoting poet W.H. Auden: "*We are the only animals who work, laugh, and pray... At work, Christians unabashedly excel. In Latin America, Eastern Europe, and even Communist China,*

opponents must grudgingly acknowledge that for all their faults, Christians are industrious." [p.209].

With that, I will leave it to my esteemed viewers to make their own conclusions.

Going abroad, anyone?

Next time, we shall take up our main topic which is **"the ethics of work from a biblical perspective."**

Watch out for this on this channel, and don't forget to share your views - either thru text message, letter to our local P.O. box here in Cagayan de Oro City, or by email.

And, once again let us remember the words of Proverbs 29:18a that says,

"Where there is no vision, the people perish!"

Good night, and God bless all of you!

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