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21. The Cost of Discipleship: A Homily

† *Obispo Maximo Godofredo J. David, Iglesia Filipina Independiente*

A homily given by Obispo Maximo Godofredo J. David in the chapel of the General Theological Seminary, New York, 15 November 2007, upon the occasion of the seminary's conferral upon him of the degree of Doctor of Divinity, honoris causa.

Just a month ago, the Iglesia Filipina Independiente held a memorial for the death anniversary of our former Obispo Maximo, the Most Reverend Alberto B. Ramento. The good bishop, who was a prominent social activist and an outspoken critic of the anti-people policies of the state, was found dead inside his rectory. In his frail human body were found seven stab wounds. The IFI Council of Bishops is "convinced that his murder was the consequence of his principled engagement with the Filipino people's struggle for the fullness of life, . . . his brutal death part of the worsening cases of extra-judicial killings in the country." Indeed, there are strong indications that Bishop Ramento's death was part of a systematic effort to silence individuals and organizations that are critical of the Filipino government.

We were all aware that Bishop Ramento had been receiving death threats, and we told him to be cautious. We even advised him to avoid traveling alone or attending protest marches and demonstrations, as he might be gunned down by motorcycle-riding assassins, like the other mass leaders who had been killed around his province. The good bishop simply told us, "I am not afraid; why should I be? They are not going to kill me with bullets anyway. They know that it would be too obvious if they were to do that."

When his wife and children, out of fear for the bishop's safety, told him to leave his diocese and retire from ministry, Bishop Ramento told them, "I know they're going to kill me next, but never will I abandon my duty to God and my ministry to the people."

When one of his priests, who was his companion in supporting the peasants' and farm workers' struggle in a sugar-cane plantation in Tarlac province, was killed in an ambush in broad daylight, he indignantly told the assassins in a public interview, "Don't think you can frighten us by threatening and killing us. We are not afraid. We are Aglipayans; our faith cannot be compromised or cowed by your acts of terror. You may kill us, but you cannot take our hope away from us."

With fallen Bishop Ramento in my mind, let me reflect on Jesus' words about the cost of following him. Jesus told his disciples, "He who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me, and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt 10:37–39).

The gospel leads us to discover that to follow Christ is to carry his cross; to become his follower is boldly to take the challenge of discipleship. Discipleship has the fundamental requirement that we forsake ourselves, leave our brothers or sisters, or father or mother, or wife or husband or children if we want to follow Christ. A disciple is one who is prepared to go along the footsteps of Christ and to follow him at all cost.

Our responsibility as disciples is to bear witness to how the grace of the gospel is unfolded in the lives of people. It is here that we also clearly see the challenge of discipleship. It pushes us outside of our comfort zones into the world where most people suffer from the violence of poverty, from the aggression of war, from the pain of discrimination, from the cruelty of injustice, from the terror of unpeace.

We cannot call ourselves disciples unless we confront and challenge these realities that deny to humanity the experience of the kingdom-blessings of love, liberty, and the fullness of life. Christ is sending us out into the world to witness to God's presence and power in the lives of the people. Discipleship demands that we open our eyes to the fact that there are broken people whose lives need the healing power of God. It is in the shattered realities of their lives that we are called to proclaim the gospel actively and assertively. We are disciples when we witness to the reconciling and sanctifying love of Christ in a world where most people struggle to survive.

We minister in a society that is wounded and in need of healing grace. A great part of the story of many people is the story of suffering, a story of too many innocent people suffering because of other people. The question that lies before us is *What action can we take?* Given the human condition of suffering, it becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to make any definitive claims about what it means to be human. Still, we know what is not human. These situations evoke, as they should, our prophetic protest: "No, it can't go on like this; we won't stand for it any longer!" The role of a disciple is to proclaim the good news of Christ – the liberating and life-giving message of the gospel.

A disciple is the enemy of whatever enslaves man, and for this the disciple must speak in a loud and clear way, fearlessly battling what denies man his humanity. Our ministry cannot therefore afford to give itself to narrow endeavors of theological reflection that do not touch human suffering. The gospel demands that we show critical solidarity with all who suffer. Concretely, unless we actively work for a more just society, trying to address the most pressing questions of human suffering, there is little hope that we will experience Jesus as the Christ of the New Testament.

The Episcopal Church, the Church of Sweden, the Old Catholic Churches, and the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, in pursuit of the mandate of discipleship, share a common devotion in proclaiming the life-giving and liberating message of Christ and in testifying to the faith that works for justice and peace. Our churches have been steadfast partners as we have faced the challenge of discipleship amid our people's quest for justice, peace, and abundant life.

There is no doubt in my mind that God wants us to continue together in pursuing our common discipleship. God wants us to be a community of believers who, despite the boundaries of time and space, are knit together in faith, in love, in purpose, in action. The Holy Spirit who works within us and among us is inspiring us to make our partnership in serving God's people flourish relevantly and responsively. The present time presents to our churches challenging opportunities to concretize the warmth of Christian fraternity, care, and affection. Let us translate our relations into practical ministries that will lead our constituency into the realization that our revered covenant is a living testimony for our common mission as fellow disciples of Christ.

The challenge of discipleship is never light. It involves a crisis decision whereby we turn from self-serving to a life committed to God and the expansion of his kingdom. Along with this core commitment is the willingness to sacrifice for the name of Christ. Sacrificing means giving ourselves for others. It means giving up that in which we find enjoyment and in which we identify our very humanity. It means transforming our love for ourselves to love for our neighbors. It means exalting the presence and power of God in other people's lives.

Brothers and sisters, the gospel has once again made us discover that to become a disciple of Christ is to take the challenge of becoming a person for others, just as Christ has openly extended his arms to serve others, even extending them wide upon the cross and showing how God can restore their shattered lives. Amen.