

The Olive Branch as an Instrument for Social Change

Justice will dwell in the wilderness; and in the fertile land, righteousness. Justice will bring about peace; righteousness will produce calm and security forever.

Isaiah 32: 16-17

[W]e firmly believe that such peace can be attained only through a just resolution of the fundamental socio-economic problems besetting our nation. As President Corazon Aquino herself has stated, these problems are "the roots of insurgency" and they must be addressed "vigorously if we are to hope reasonably for a lasting peace".

National Democratic Front, 1986

Edmundo Garcia, *Dawn Over Darkness* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1988) 132 pp.

Peace! It has eluded us for so long. Day in and day out, we are bombarded by grisly reports of assassinations, ambushes, massacres, violent demonstrations, bombings, forced evacuations, and beheadings. The effect is disturbing. We have almost come to accept the raging civil war as something normal, something which we cannot do anything about. Indeed, if this attitude of helplessness and resignation persists, our nation cannot but expect more days and nights of fratricidal war.

Ed Garcia is one Filipino who firmly believes that we can and should do something about the unfortunate situation in our country. He argues that we cannot afford to leave the work of peace to the government (let alone the US) or to the armed revolutionary movements. Instead, he urges us to actively pressure the warring parties to sit down and talk.

Die-hard fascists, imperialists, and the reactionary classes would be deeply disappointed with the work of this former member of the 1987 Constitutional Commission. His idea of a lasting peace runs counter to theirs. It is not the kind of peace which will leave the prevailing exploitative order intact. Instead, Garcia emphasizes that a durable peace would only be possible if there is "respect for

human rights, people's participation, and steps towards social transformation".

In the first part of his book, Garcia invites us to a "descent into darkness". He begins by showing that, since the second half of the 20th century, the Third World has become the major theater of armed conflicts. In 1987, for instance, all except one of the 37 major conflicts occurred in the underdeveloped world. He argues that the origin of such conflicts are "historical, their nature structural, and their consequences both complex and tragic" (p. 5).

Applying this general analysis of armed conflicts, Garcia traces the roots of the continuing civil war in the country to "the politics of exclusion and the practice of economic exploitation that date back to the colonial period" (p. 6). He provides us with current statistics showing poverty amidst growth and worsening human rights situation. He then cites the following reasons as to why the internal war rages on despite the ouster of Marcos: the failure of the Aquino government to quickly implement genuine reforms; its lack of political will to abolish the repressive decrees of the previous regime and to punish human rights offenders in the military; and its support for vigilantes (including fanatical religious cults) that only perpetrate more human rights abuses.

The second part of the book explores "the avenues for peaceful change (which) are either blocked or inadequate" (p. 46). Garcia's



assumption is that conflicts in society are inevitable and "at times both necessary and creative" (p. 45). These conflicts, however, erupt into violence when the clashing interests do not find avenues for the peaceful resolution thereof. In the Third World, structural violence – that which consigns the majority of the people to poverty and political exclusion – is "the main obstacle" to peace. Unable to participate meaningfully in decision-making (as when the people were not consulted in the drafting of the Letter of Intent submitted by the Aquino government to the International Monetary Fund) and confronted with state violence when attempting to intervene in state affairs, the poor are left with no other recourse but armed revolution. The state then responds with more repression and the people react with counter-violence, thus setting off a deadly spiral of war.

Garcia believes that democratization and demilitarization are essential if conflicts are to be resolved without resort to war. Mechanisms for popular participation and political pluralism must be instituted. People's organizations must be protected and heard. The media monopoly of the rich must be broken. The military must be reformed and a self-reliant (i.e., free from US control) civilian-based defense system must be adopted.

Garcia concedes that the above-mentioned propositions are difficult to implement. Realizing that violent conflicts in the country cannot be avoided, he settles for regulating violence

"so as to create an atmosphere perhaps more conducive to subsequent political negotiations" (p. 53). He then discusses international humanitarian laws as formulated by the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1979 and a code of conduct for armed combatants. He also mentions the 1977 Protocol II of the 1949 Geneva Conventions. A necessary step towards peace is the recognition and acceptance of these humanitarian principles by the government and the armed revolutionary opposition.

In the last section of the book, he suggests steps that can be taken "to end human rights violations and to overturn unjust structures". "In this way," he continues, "we can envision a lasting peace borne on the shoulders of people's power" (p. 63). After listing down ten measures to end human rights abuses as recommended by international and local human rights groups, he outlines an "Agenda for Conflict Resolution in the Philippines". Included in this agenda are joint measures which can be supported by the people, government and combatants (e.g., ceasefires during religious holidays, peace zones, people's peace delegations, etc.); promotion of human rights and peace education through schools and media; and the holding of public discussions on important political issues to enlarge the democratic space and encourage pluralism.

In the epilogue, he points out the changes in the international scene which have created

an atmosphere conducive to a peaceful resolution of the armed conflict in the country. He mentions the Soviet peace initiatives through arms reduction, the trend towards negotiations in Southern Africa, Central America, and Asia; and the efforts of Southeast Asian countries to realize the 1967 ASEAN vision of a Southeast Asian Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality. He notes that although conflicts have not been resolved, at least the parties in conflict are talking.

Dawn Over Darkness is not Garcia's first book on peace (his *The Filipino Quest: A Just and Lasting Peace* immediately comes to mind). It is therefore somewhat disappointing that he did not include in the current book lessons from the experiences in peace-building of local peace activists, such as those with the Coalition for Peace and other organizations in Naga and Sagada. Undoubtedly, peace activists elsewhere would find these lessons very helpful.

Dawn Over Darkness has its strong points. First, it gives an accurate analysis (complete with the latest statistics) of the roots of the armed conflict in the Philippines. It brings the most recent works in peace research within the grasp of the reader. By locating the roots of social unrest in the unjust political and

socio-economic structures of Philippine society, the author suggests intelligent approaches to the peaceful and successful resolution of the armed conflict. No less than democratization and social transformation, he concludes, are needed to bring about a just and lasting peace in our nation.

Second, the book, which has pertinent biblical passages, delivers a powerful moral argument for peace advocacy. It is a good educational material for unthinking Christians who support the Aquino government's policy of "total war" and "quick victory" against the revolutionary movements. It may also serve as an eye-opener or a reminder to ex-street parliamentarians in government (the President included) that the civil war cannot be stopped by adopting a militarist approach -- the same approach used by the dictatorship they had helped overthrow.

Finally, for those in the revolutionary movements, the book could help them realize that not all of those who wage peace rather than "people's war" or *jihad* are allies of the forces of reaction. Garcia's book proves that a good number of them are partners in the journey towards a free, democratic, and just society. Peace activists can be revolutionaries too.