



The Roman Catholic

DIOCESE OF LEGAZPI

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A CALL TO HOPE

Our Brothers and Sisters in Christ the Lord:

In the face of the current events in our nation, as stewards of our faith and life as followers of Christ, we, your Bishop and Clergy, desire to convey a message to you, with the hope that we may help one another in praying and reflecting on how we should respond to the challenges of the times we are facing today.

In the First Reading for this Third Sunday of Lent, we hear the word of the Lord God to Moses: “I have witnessed the affliction of my people... I have heard their cry... I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them” (*Exodus 3:7-8*).

It is good to ask how we are to understand, for example, the arrest of former President Rodrigo Duterte by the International Criminal Court (ICC), so that he may answer the accusation against him of the killing of more than 5,000 people (or even over 30,000 according to some) during his presidency from 2016 to 2022.

It will be recalled that when he was summoned before a Senate committee, the former President openly admitted that he had ordered the police to kill pushers and addicts—now the very basis for the warrant of his arrest. Because of the power and influence he displayed as a leader—strong-willed, showing no regard for anyone, not even the Lord God whom he often mocked—hardly any of us imagined that he would one day face a situation beyond his control, and that his voice would lose its power, as is now happening to him.

What does this event involving former President Duterte teach us?

First of all, we are reminded that all our actions have consequences. And if what we do is wrong—especially if it causes harm or death to others—we will be held accountable and judged before the court of humanity and the judgment seat of God.

Second, we are reminded that every person has dignity that must not be disregarded. Human life is deeply valuable, and no one has the right to treat it as disposable—because life comes from God, and we do not have the power to destroy, abuse, trample on, or take the life of anyone. If we cannot bear to witness even a single person being killed, how can we ever ignore the thousands who have already been killed, whatever the reason may be? We cannot say that just because someone is a drug user or a criminal, their fate must be death.

Human rights are not meant only for a few, but for all; not just for the powerful or the wealthy, the educated or the influential. Human rights are for all.

Third, let us not forget that many of our brothers and sisters continue to be victims of various forms of human rights violations, especially the poor and vulnerable.

1. Thousands of students go to school every day without having breakfast, even though they could be given food upon arriving at school—because the government has funds intended for such basic needs.
2. Many of our brothers and sisters cannot access medicine or hospital care because they have no money and no one to assist them with their health needs—yet the very programs meant to respond to such needs of the poor, like PhilHealth, have been stripped of funding.
3. How many lives have been lost in road accidents because of poorly built or rushed roads and bridges? How many lives were lost, how many homes were swept away, because the funds for flood control projects were lost? How many communities that were never prone to flooding are now experiencing floods—because of projects they were never consulted about and from which they are not even the main beneficiaries?
4. It is said that our national budget this year was approved not to respond to the real needs of the people, but to serve the whims, desires, and ambitions of a few greedy politicians.

All these painful images of our nation—the extreme suffering of so many people; the neglect of programs and projects meant for the common good, because of corruption and the selfish ambitions of those in power; the continued weakening of our economy and the quality of life of each person, further marked by the arrest of former President Rodrigo Duterte—these do not only bring anxiety and a loss of hope, but above all, a growing frustration that could lead us to division or even greater violence.

The question is: **Where are we being called in the face of our present situation? What must we do as citizens—as Christian citizens?**

Let us listen to the words of the Prophet Zechariah (7:9): “Render true justice, show kindness and compassion to one another.”

1. Let us begin with compassion for others, which will lead us to grow in love for our nation and our communities. Because we have compassion, we cannot tolerate seeing others neglected, oppressed, or—most especially—killed. Because we have compassion,

we support the good work of our police and military, but we also reject abuses of authority and violations of human rights and the rule of law.

2. Do not lose hope. Keep doing what is right, even if the results are not yet visible. Continue seeking and speaking the truth, especially when many are misled by disinformation or trapped in lies. Keep choosing peace and forgiveness, even in the face of those who have given in to fear and greed. Keep striving and working—not for ourselves, but for those without a voice or power, and for the generations yet to come.
3. In this election season, let us first be citizens and voters with integrity, who respect the sacredness of the ballot—before we even choose candidates who themselves must have integrity and a heart for service. Volunteer with PPCRV or NAMFREL in your parish to help with voter education and to safeguard a clean and orderly election day. Or support the campaign of honest candidates, as long as we do not take part in cheating, vote-buying, or spreading disinformation.

In the spirit of this Jubilee Year of Hope, let us reflect on the words of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*: “I invite everyone to renewed hope, for hope ‘speaks to us of something deeply rooted in every human heart, independently of our circumstances and historical conditioning. Hope speaks to us of a thirst, an aspiration, a longing for a life of fulfillment, a desire to achieve great things, things that fill our heart and lift our spirit to lofty realities like truth, goodness and beauty, justice and love... Hope is bold; it can look beyond personal convenience, the petty securities and compensations which limit our horizon, and it can open us up to grand ideals that make life more beautiful and worthwhile... Let us continue, then, to advance along the paths of hope” (55).

Our Lady of Salvation, strengthen our hope, and in following the will of your Son, always remind us that we, like the tree in the Gospel, are called to bear fruit—for if not, we may be cut down... Amen!

The Bishop and Clergy of the Diocese of Legazpi