

# Climate Change and the Philippines

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## **Socio-cultural Situation of the Philippines**

The Philippines is a land of contrasts. It is a land blessed with many natural resources. **It has prolific and highly diverse marine and coastal resources which makes it the third highest in marine biodiversity in the world. Although a small country, it has 9% of the total known global reef area at 25,060 sq. km.** The US State Department reports that the Philippines is one of the world's most highly mineralized countries, with untapped mineral wealth estimated at USD 840 billion. It's copper, gold and chromate deposits are among the largest in the world. **These natural resource rich areas are also home to the country's indigenous peoples who total around 11.3 million belonging to 110 ethno-linguistic groups.** In spite of these natural wealth, the archipelago is no paradise. It is among the most disaster prone countries in the world, having all types of natural hazards. **It is along the path of the Pacific Ring of Fire. Thus it is prone to earthquakes and other geological upheavals. It is in the typhoon belt, making it vulnerable to typhoons, storm surges, flooding and landslides. These are aggravated by climate change. According to Global Assessment Report (GAR), the Philippines is on the third slot in terms of vulnerability to disasters.** We don't blame these disasters only to our geological situation on this planet. A lot of blame is also due to our abuse of the environment – mostly due to selfishness of the elite and bad governance of the land that favor the rich and the powerful.

The contrast is observed not only in the rich natural resources and the catastrophic natural disasters that we experience. It is also seen in the uneven distribution of wealth in the country. It cannot be said that the country is poor, because we have rich natural resources. The land is fertile and the seas abound with aquatic resources. **Poverty is nonetheless experienced by the vast majority of the people because wealth is unevenly distributed. 21.6% of the people, that is around 21.8**

million Filipinos, live below poverty line, that is below 1.5 euro a day. As per the latest government survey, 90% of the total number of household has an income of 22 euros a day with more than 65% of these families making do with only 7 euros a day! 76% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country is controlled by only 40 families, whereas in Japan the share of the 40 richest families to their GDP is only 3%. No wonder that even if the rating of the national economy (Fitch granted a BBB- Positive Investment Grade rating last September 24, 2015 while Moody's granted the Philippines a Baa2 Stable Investment Grade rating last December 14, 2015.- Investment grade (subject to moderate credit risk and with adequate payment capacity)) rises, the people in general continue to be poor. The Philippines' economic growth this year is 6.8 % (2016, ADB), second only to China. This improved international rating is bad news to the poor. This means that the country now is classified as a middle-income state and an emerging tiger in Asia. Because of this perception many institutions and countries which help the poor are pulling out of our country, but the situation of our poor remains the same as before, if not even worse. In the improved international economic rating, the poor suffer all the more while the business and political elite get the credit.

**Globalization is not beneficial to our economic climate.** Filipino businesses are being killed by multinationals because there are no safety nets to preserve our own industries and even our agricultural products. From being a rice exporting country in the 1970's we are now importing our staple food. There is no food security. Instead of supporting our farmers and implementing the comprehensive land reform program that was put into law since 1989, the government prefers agri-business to be operated by the rich and by foreign investors. So we export bananas, pineapples and asparagus harvested from big plantations where the agricultural workers get very low wages, but we do not have enough rice and vegetables for our own people.

In the Philippines we find the contrast and the intermingling of the Western and Eastern cultures. Catholicism is very much felt all over the country. 83% of our people are nominally Catholic, 10% belong to other Christian denominations and 5% are Islam. The rest are Buddhists, animists or belonging to home grown religious sects. One can hardly find a Filipino who says he/she does not believe in God. Yet,

in the cities there is crash materialism. The Americans did not only give us the English language and our public school system but they continue to export to us their version of consumerism. McDonalds, Shakey's, Starbucks, Malls dot our cities.

In spite of the strong western imprint from Spain and the US, Eastern influence is not lost. We belong to the Malay race, thus very similar in our physical feature with the Malaysians, the Indonesians and the inhabitants of the Pacific islands. Our languages too have great similarities. The Chinese influence is also strong. Most of the business elites are from Chinese descent. My own grandfather came from China. Presently there is an invasion of Koreans coming to our country to study English and set up business in our cities. Japan is the biggest business investor in country. **The Philippines is indeed an interesting country. It is a melting pot – brown in color, Christian is soul, American in education, Chinese in business!**

### **What is the role of the Catholic Church and the Catholic Faith in this country?**

Thanks to the generous and intrepid missionaries from Spain from 1521 till the present, the Christian faith has been firmly planted in Philippine soil. The seed took root and grew because the ground itself was ready for the faith. There is a deep religious spirit in the Filipino heart, even at present. There is a palpable sense of the presence of the world of the spirits. There is a desire to be in touch with the transcendent then as now.

**With great sacrifices the missionaries reached various points of our country when there were yet no roads, no bridges and even no maps to identify them. They started many of our old towns and cities. Unlike what they did in the Americas, in the Philippines the Spanish missionaries did not force us to learn Spanish. They learned our local languages.** In fact many of them wrote the first grammar and the dictionaries of our local tongues. In several instances the first written literature of these languages was the *Doctrina Cristiana*, the Catholic catechism.

Together with the movement for independence from Spain in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was also the vilification of the Catholic faith because the system of the *Patronato Real* tightly identified Spanish administration with the Catholic Church. In fact in many remote areas the Spanish parish priest is the only

official of the Spanish crown among the people. **As Spain was defeated by the Filipino revolutionaries in 1898 the Americans came and bought our country from Spain at the amount of 20 Million US dollars in the Treaty of Paris.** Many Spanish friars left the country at the coming of the Americans but fortunately new missionaries coming from the United States, Germany, Ireland, Australia, Italy and Belgium came. So in spite of the onslaught of Protestant missionaries who were actively supported by the US administration, the Catholic faith remained.

We are looking forward to the year 2021, which will be the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coming of the faith on our shores with the arrival of Ferdinand Magellan. The first masses were celebrated in our shores when he came and the first natives were baptized.

### **Effects of Climate Change in the Philippines**

Because of its geographic situation our country is very vulnerable to climate disasters. **We have typhoons which usually form in the Pacific Ocean and are attracted to the land mass of Asia. In the average some 22 typhoons visit us every year. We have the El Nino and the La Nina phenomena.** In our case the El Nino is usually characterized by heat and draught. It would be counterbalanced the next year by the La Nina with its excessive rains, which cause floodings and landslides. We have many active volcanoes. **The latest big volcanic eruption was that of Mt. Pinatubo in 1991 which cooled the earth's global temperature by 1 degree because the quantity of ashes sprouted to the sky that filtered the sun's rays to the earth to cool down.** We have frequent earthquakes. In fact we are waiting for THE BIG ONE, which we expect to come anytime because a strong earthquake would come to us every four hundred years and now its time is due.

These natural calamities are aggravated by the changes in climate that we experience. Maybe in this part of the world, climate change is an academic issue. Some can even still deny it. In our part of the world, it is a reality. We experience it for more than ten years. The pattern of the climate is now erratic. For the past three years we have been experiencing massive rains in various parts of the country. So there are floods even in areas which before did not experience them. Typhoons become more frequent and they land on areas which did not have them

before. They are also becoming stronger. When I was a boy the highest, that is, the strongest typhoon would be signal number 3, which would have winds blowing at 150 to 185 kph . Now it is rather common to have super typhoons of signal number 4 and even 5, with winds as strong as more than 220 kph. Typhoon Hayan, locally known as typhoon Yolanda, was a case in point with highest wind speed of 315 kph. It landed on the islands of Leyte and Samar. These islands are used to be visited by typhoons. In fact people there are poor because their livelihood, which is mostly farming and fishing, are constantly disrupted by typhoons. When it was told them in November 2013 that a strong typhoon would come, they did not mind. They were used to typhoons. They took the usual precautions for these typhoons. But when it did come on Nov 9, all were taken by surprised. This is the reason why more than 10,000 people died. They did not expect it to be that strong. They did not expect the storm surge that would engulf their houses and buildings. They were totally unprepared for such magnitude!

What is disconcerting is that climate change hit us so hard in the Pacific when we contribute very little to it. Our carbon emission is only 113,035 kilotons a year, a merely 0.31% of the total carbon emission in the world. We do not have much industries that pollute the environment. We do not have large scale farming nor cattle farms that emit methane. Yet we feel the brunt of the ill effects of the green house phenomenon. This is not only true of the Philippines but also of the many small countries in the Pacific. Last December the new Cardinal of Port Moresby was as guest in our Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) general assembly which was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka. He appealed to us. He is the head of the Federation of Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Oceania (F.C.B.C.O.) He said that many small island countries are vanishing in the Pacific due to the rising sea waters.

### **Call of our Catholic Faith**

We are happy that the Catholic church is speaking on our Christian responsibility for the environment. Already St. John Paul II spoke in several occasions on our stewardship of creation. In the Philippines our Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) came out with a pastoral letter in January 29, 1998, one of the first from the bishops' conference - on the care of creation. It is entitled WHAT IS

**HAPPENING TO OUR BEAUTIFUL LAND.** The Pope Benedict XVI was more explicit on our Christian duty to care for the earth, especially in his message on the 43<sup>rd</sup> World Day of Prayer for Peace in 2010 (“If {we} you want to cultivate peace, protect creation”). Finally the *Laudato Si* of Pope Francis leaves us no doubt that environmental concern is not peripheral to our faith. Plainly we are told that “Christians realize that their responsibility within creation, and their duty towards nature and the Creator, are an essential part of their faith. It is good for humanity and the world at large when we believers better recognize the ecological commitments which stem from our convictions.” (LS 64)

There is no doubt now about the demands of our faith. This is not just the call of some progressive groups. It is a demand of our faith. Pope Francis writes that for Christians “the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience.” (LS 217)

What do we do in the Philippines? Several dioceses have set up commissions on ecology which continuously educate the people of God about our Christian responsibility to care for creation. These commissions not only teach but they also initiate projects to make this commitment real. They do waste segregation and promote recycling. They teach people to revert to organic farming to avoid harmful pesticides and chemical fertilizers. They promote tree planting and adopt mountains to rehabilitate them. Many in our cities are already eaten by consumerism. So the call to more simple lifestyle is an uphill battle. In the coastal regions we educate people to avoid dynamite and cyanide fishing as these kill the corals. We plant mangroves along our shores both to protect soil erosion and to have nests where small fish can thrive. **Several dioceses have established the SEASON OF CREATION, which is from September 1 to October 4, the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi. So liturgically we celebrate and speak of creation.**

For years we have been fighting against large scale mining. **Big scale mining is ecologically not viable in the Philippines which is made up of small islands, rich with biodiversity and inhabited by farmers and fisher folks. Our mountains are flattened,**

the sources of water are dried up and the farm lands and seashores are flooded by mine tailings and chemicals. Because of corruption, government officials are easily bribed to give permits to big scale miners, and many of them are European companies based in Great Britain, Switzerland, Norway and Russia. Canadian, Australian, Korean, Japanese and Chinese companies are also culprits. These mining enterprises destroy the homes of our indigenous peoples. In fact many indigenous people leaders were killed by soldiers and security people of the international mining ventures. We need your support here in our struggles against mining.

### **Environmental ecology and human ecology.**

Pope Benedict wrote: “The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: on a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others.” (*Caritas in Veritate* 51) This is an important message for us in the Philippines who are engaged in the environment. There are many threats now to the human ecology: contraceptive mentality, destruction of the family through divorce and same-sex marriage, creeping culture of death by death penalty and extra-judicial killings, and the great problem of poverty. Pope Francis reminds us: “We have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*” (LS 49)

We are fighting a battle from many fronts: we fight against poverty and the world economic system that keeps us poor, we give our people education and opportunities to rise out of poverty, we help form families that they remain strong, loving and happy as a family in our materialistic world, we fight against unwritten government policies that promote killing by death penalty and extra judicial killings, we struggle against business concerns which are out to convert our natural resources into money, and we help our people to appreciate and

protect the gift of creation that we are so richly blessed as a country. Truly it is daunting and can be tiring!

### **Our Appeal**

Pope Francis never tires to repeat in *Laudato Si* “everything is connected.” We can also say this: even if Europe is thousands of miles away from the Pacific: we are connected. What you do here affects us. Your consumption here destroys the environment in other parts of world. Conversely, the destruction of the environment in our poor countries due to your continuous demands for our minerals and other resources also contributes to global warming, which we already experience and surely you too will experience, since we are only in one planet, which is our common home. We just experience the first effects, but it will also come to you one in one form or another. Knowing that we are connected to each other gives us hope that we can do something for each other. I fully subscribe to the appeal of Pope Francis when he tells us “Less is More”. Let us take this as our common program, and a very practical one too. He spells it out: “Christian spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little. It is a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords us, to be spiritually detached from what we possess, and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack. This implies avoiding the dynamic of dominion and the mere accumulation of pleasures.” (LS 222)

Everyone of us can do this now!



