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**THE CHURCH'S MINISTRY IN
CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: SOUNDINGS
FROM HENRI NOUWEN**

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Current issues around the world reflect a society where materialism and secularism are slowly taking precedence. Communities seem to live in mutual fear, rather than mutual trust, where the threat of devastating war or conflict is imminent. For example, North Korea has made headlines with its recent missile launches. Territorial disputes between China and Taiwan, Malaysia and the Philippines, and China, Taiwan and the Philippines to name a few, continue over certain areas, with countries intimidating each other through the show of military force and prowess.

In the midst of all the global tension, the Catholic Church itself continues to be shaken by different issues, when it seeks to be a voice of reason and compassion in the face of so many of these disputes. When Pope Francis succeeded Pope Benedict, many knew that several pressing challenges were already on his plate, including that of the sex abuse scandals, secularization and modernization, inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, religious freedom, as well as the debate on priestly celibacy and women priests.¹ Some would go so far

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¹Eric McClan, "The Pope's To-Do List: 7 Challenges Facing Francis As He Starts His New Job," *NCBNews.com*. http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/03/

as to say that the Church is in the midst of a crisis, especially here in the Philippines where the Catholic Church has been making news for some of its actions in the recent elections as well as its role in the many social and political issues of the country, the latest of which concern legislation on reproduction and divorce.

In the Philippines last April 2013, the Social Weather Station (SWS) came out with a survey² based on 1,200 participants that showed how weekly mass attendance has declined to 37%, while one out of every eleven Filipinos thinks of leaving the Catholic Church, despite 81% of the participants identifying themselves with the Catholic faith.³ This came on the heels of the RH bill debate⁴ raging among the Philippine government, the Catholic Church, and the Filipino people, and the news from around the world on numerous sex abuse scandals by many Catholic priests. Internally, there seems to be a loss of hope. The Catholic Church in the Philippines, while perhaps being recognized as a credible institution with something to say,⁵ seems to be relegated as unimportant in the lives of its congregation, with its ministers sometimes seen as ineffective, harsh, obsolete, or simply

14/17301544-the-popes-to-do-list-7-challenges-facing-francis-as-he-starts-his-new-job?lite. Accessed June 15, 2013.

²The Philippine media headlined an article last April 8, 2013, reporting a drop in Catholic mass goes despite the country's description of being majority Catholic. This sparked a reaction from many people, some defending the Church on the grounds that the statistics may not be accurate, while others agreeing that this seemed to confirm the fact that many people are simply nominal Catholics and not practicing ones, and that this was a telling sign of the "health" of the Church congregation.

³David Dizon, "PH Catholics going to Mass weekly drops to 37%: SWS," *ABS-CBNNews*. <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/focus/04/08/13/ph-catholics-going-mass-weekly-drops-37-sws>. Accessed June 12, 2013.

⁴The Reproductive Health (RH) Bill is a piece of legislation that was recently passed into law in the Philippines which will allow and fund sex and reproductive health education in schools, the distribution of contraceptives, as well as family planning, as well as give better maternal health care. The Philippine Catholic Church stands against the RH bill due to the provision on contraceptives, citing the importance and sanctity of life as its reasons. Proponents of the bill argue that the RH Bill would help decrease the number of maternal deaths and also hopefully lessen the poverty incidence in the country through proper health care and family planning. The RH bill has been the subject of many arguments, rallies, and criticisms thrown at the Church and is often used as an example of how the Philippine Catholic Church is disconnected to the experiences of its congregation.

⁵Camille Diola, "Filipinos Trust Church the Most – Survey," *Philstar.com*. <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2013/02/27/913795/filipinos-trust-church-most-survey>. Accessed June 17, 2013.

nonsensical broken records that repeat the same thing over and over again to no avail.

With all of these critical issues and events happening to the Church, perhaps it is high time that the Church start “scrutinizing the signs of the times in light of the Gospel”⁶ and what they may have to say to us and how the Church should move forward, not just in the Philippines but also in the global scene. When the Church is criticized, defending the Church and apologetics is all very well in order for the people to understand the reasoning behind our actions, but such events also require the Church to listen to the critique and other arguments as well, with the hope of learning something new from the dialogue. It seems that people are getting frustrated with the Catholic Church that does not seem to listen or bother to keep in touch with the reality that its congregation and faithful experience in their day to day lives, and thus are turning away from the Church due to this disconnection. Fr. Tabora echoes this sentiment in his blog entry:

Seriously though, there ought to be great concern. People have been leaving the Catholic Church. People are about to leave the Church... What I am picking up is exasperation. People are tired of lousy homilies that ramble in inanities that begin and never end, and never end because they should never have begun. People are tired of being preached at, of being treated as if they were younger than adolescents, of being lectured, of being scolded, of being dictated upon. People are tired of obstinate claims to absolute truth, when the thinking world continues to seek truth. People are tired of being told how to think, when they can think for themselves, and how to choose, when they can choose for themselves, and how to have sex when they can have sex for themselves.⁷

With the exasperation of the laity and the seemingly many people turning away from the faith, it does seem to show that the Church is undergoing some form of crisis. Yet, was not the Catholic Church built on crisis after crisis? Timothy Radcliffe explains how paradoxical it is that as Christians, the Church commemorates each Sunday the Last Supper, where the community was on the brink of

⁶Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World)*. December 7, 1965. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. Accessed June 28, 2013.

⁷Joel Tabora, “The Catholic Church: Between the Sublime and the Ridiculous,” *Taborasj.wordpress.com*. <http://taborasj.wordpress.com/2013/02/07/the-catholic-church-between-the-sublime-and-the-ridiculous/>. Accessed June 12, 2013.

disintegration, when Jesus was arrested and his disciples all fled, with Judas betraying him and Peter denying him⁸. A similar event occurred at the time when the Christians were being persecuted by the Romans, where Christians betrayed their fellow Christians, and Jesus' second coming, which was thought to be imminent, did not come—from this time came the gospels which were written to help the early Christian communities understand what was happening and why.⁹ The Church uses her wounds and seemingly dire situations and turns them into the nuggets of opportunities that have shaped her into who she is today. The Church continues to live in hope, despite these crises.

To Be a Minister Today

What then, does it mean to be a minister in society today and to be a Church that is fully immersed in the world, especially in the face of this perception of the Catholic Church and the seeming "crises"? How are we to go about it? We have some answers from Vatican II, where *Gaudium et Spes* proclaims that we are to be a Church immersed in the world, just as Jesus did in his becoming fully man.¹⁰ However, the Church that comprises of the hierarchy and theologians, down to all the members of the laity, cannot continue acting as though society now is the same as society was before, and there is still a need to adapt to the needs of the society today.

In a world where people seek the truth, it is not enough that the Church keeps on repeating the important truths of the Catholic Church, but the Church ought to do so in a way that does not "strangle" the people nor make them feel as though they cannot think for themselves.¹¹ The Church should not make the people feel all the more alone or isolated. Despite the growing consciousness of a global community that is immediately and instantaneously connected through the internet, telephone, or other forms of media and communication, there are more and more people who acutely feel loneliness and isolation, especially since connection and interdependence with others

⁸Timothy Radcliffe, "I Will Awake the Dawn," in *What is the Point of Being a Christian*, New York: Burns and Oates, 2005, 15.

⁹Timothy Radcliffe, "The Coming of the Son of Man: Mark's Gospel and the Subversion of the Apocalyptic Imagination," *Language, Meaning and God: Essays in Honour of Jerbert McCabe OP*, ed., Brian Davies OP, London: 1987, 176-189.

¹⁰*Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

¹¹Joel Tabora, "The Catholic Church..."

has now become a necessity that is taken for granted rather than just an opportunity for people today. Pope Francis comments on the “globalization of indifference,” where people have stopped caring about other people’s suffering, and the individual is the topmost priority.¹² Thus, it is not anyone’s business if it doesn’t concern them, and the Pope laments how people have forgotten to weep over other’s suffering: each person is basically alone to fight his or her troubles. Ours is not to compound this even more by making people feel that they are different by non-conformity to the many rules of the Church, and that any form of non-conformity will automatically result in eternal damnation and loneliness for their souls.

Gaudium et Spes opens with these lines:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of this world, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties, of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men.¹³

To call the Church a “community composed of men” has many repercussions about the Church. Henri Nouwen, a writer of many influential books on prayer, the Church, and spirituality, gives us some insight on what it may mean to be a minister in contemporary society. His book, *The Wounded Healer*, extends and affirms the ecclesiology of *Gaudium et Spes*, based on the fact that the Church is a “community composed of men.” Despite the book being written more than thirty years ago in 1979, Henri Nouwen’s timeless message it conveys continues to resonate with society and the Church today—the Church is a wounded healer. She is not perfect, as the Church is still made up of fallible human beings, and while the Church’s leaders ought to be good shepherds of the flock, and its flock good models of the faith, this does not mean that they are sinless. As Stephen Bullivant explains in his paper on the abuses of the Church, “the Church is unique, yes, but the Church is not wholly unlike every other group or community.”¹⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, too, affirms that, while the Church is holy, just as Christ is holy, the Church is not “innocent,

¹²Junno Esteves, “Pope Francis: We Have Fallen Into Global Indifference,” Zenit.<http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/pope-francis-we-have-fallen-into-globalized-indifference>. Accessed July 9, 2013.

¹³*Gaudium et Spes*, 1.

¹⁴Stephen Bullivant, “Vatican II and the Abuses in the Church,” (Conference, Ateneo de Manila University, July 19, 2013).

undefiled, or knows nothing of sin": "While Christ, holy, innocent, and undefiled, knew nothing of sin, but came to expiate only the sins of the people, the Church, embracing in its bosom sinners, at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, always follows the way of repentance and renewal."¹⁵

The Church is always in need of repentance and renewal—she is a wounded Church, and is in a constant state of *aggiornamento*. However, this woundedness is not something to hide and forget about, as was purportedly done by some Church leaders when they handled the cases of paedophilic priests, nor is it something to be proud about and raise high for all to see. Rather, this woundedness is something essential and can actually be helpful to the Church's ministry, allowing us to become a true Church in the world, as *Gaudium et Spes* proclaims.

It can be very difficult to be a Church that ministers to people in the modern and postmodern society today, where rationalism, and empiricism have become important, underpinning the different lifestyles, ideologies, and philosophies of many people today—whatever seems to contradict these are considered old fashioned, archaic, and wrong. Many seemingly enjoy baring the sins of the Church in order to expose the Church as hypocritical because many times the Church is perceived to have come off as self-righteous, seemingly giving off a smug holier than thou attitude that makes people feel snubbed, while refusing to listen to the arguments on the other side of social and political issues that seemingly contradict Church teaching. People perceive the Church to be preaching empty words, without practising what she is preaching. This observation is evident in the criticisms lobbed at the Church here in the Philippines. The Church has a moral call and message for people to hear, one that she herself must also live by, but perhaps there is a different way of preaching these teachings—the Church is not necessarily confined to the image of someone perfect helping someone who is not perfect, which is a prevalent image of Catholics (and Christians!) among non-Catholics (and non-Christians). The Church definitely does not and should not have a messianic complex, as if stooping down to help those who are "less fortunate."

¹⁵Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1965. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html. Accessed July 20, 2013.

While the Church does not condone sins, nor expect less of Christians or excuse them from striving to do the good by being less scandalized at their own personal sins and social sins, it should not surprise us too much that our Church leaders may, at one time or another, sin. While we do expect Christians to know and do better, instead of feeling ashamed, hiding it, hushing it up, and continuing to project to the world the image of a Church that is perfect and that non membership automatically damns everyone else, such mistakes should be a learning and healing opportunity. The images of the Church as hiding so many secrets, or holding secret meetings to conspire in making up the faith while keeping the laity in the dark, or being up there and out of reach are not necessarily true about the Church, but that many people from the outside, and even among its own congregation, view the Church in this way is telling of how the Church ministers to the people in the world and what kind of Church is seemingly projected to the world.

A Wounded Church in the World

Henri Nouwen pointedly asks the question, “[as ministers,] who can take away suffering without entering into it?” He reaffirms the fact that “no one can help anyone without becoming involved, without entering his whole person into the painful situation, without taking the risk of becoming hurt, wounded, or destroyed in the process.”¹⁶ Many have critiqued the Church as someone who does not take this risk and simply stays away from the taint of daily human life—its priests and nuns are safe in cloisters, praying devoutly with enough food, while others are starving on the streets. As the Church continues to minister to the people of today, she is not and should not be an institution that “gives what she has to those who do not have,” but rather “one who helps those who are searching to discover reality as the source of their existence.”¹⁷ In order to do this, one must also be able to enter into one’s own suffering and woundedness, to be in touch with this shared human condition. Ministers and priests of the Church may also feel this loneliness and isolation, particularly when they are trying to express the message and truths of the Church, but end up having their message fall on deaf ears as they continue to beg, perhaps in vain, for their audience’s attention.

¹⁶Henri Nouwen, “Ministry to a Hopeless Man,” in *The Wounded Healer*, Bangalore: IJA Publications, 2008, 72.

¹⁷Henri Nouwen, “Ministry for a Rootless Generation,” in *The Wounded Healer*, 39.

The Church's woundedness offers a concrete starting point in reaching out and connecting with others, not simply in the sense of telling the person that the Church, too, suffers the same problems and that they should not worry because it is perfectly normal and all shall be well in heaven, but in the sense of communicating to people the idea that there is a common reality that everyone draws from and everyone is grappling with. The Church does understand the hopes, dreams, struggles, and ambitions of the people and wishes to grapple with them together with the people—the Church and society do not simply coexist in this world or remain merely as friends, they are brothers with a common link. To simply know that another is undergoing the same arduous life as you is not very comforting, but it is another thing altogether when the Church is able to get in touch with the idea that the experiences people go through are a common human condition that is charged with meaning, allowing people to walk alongside each other and journey together. Henri Nouwen points out in "Life of the Beloved" that, "The great spiritual call for the Beloved Children of God is to pull their brokenness away from the shadow of the curse... it is possible to live our brokenness, not as a confirmation of our fear that we are worthless, but as an opportunity to purify and deepen the blessing that rests upon us."¹⁸

To see past the ordinary and sometimes seemingly meaningless events of life is something all people are called to do in the belief that creation and reality is shot through with grace. The power of God is not simply described as a unilateral power—that of being able to do whatever he wishes, whenever he wishes to—but also as a transformative power, that actually brings forth life from death, and meaning and joy from suffering.¹⁹ The Church sees this most clearly and poignantly in God becoming man, as he "was himself made flesh and dwelt on the earth of man... he taught us by example that that we too must shoulder that cross which the world and flesh inflict."²⁰ In his becoming man, he suffered death on a cross and was raised from the dead by God the Father, the fullest expression of our image of a

¹⁸Henri Nouwen, "Belovedness," in *The Only Necessary Thing: Living A Prayerful Life*, ed., Wendy Wilson Greer, Diliman, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2004, 74-75.

¹⁹Tyron Inbody, "The Triune God and Human Suffering," in *The Transforming God: An Interpretation of Suffering and Evil*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, 178-179.

²⁰*Gaudium et Spes*, 38.

suffering God, a God who enters in our world through his divine participation in Israel's suffering and human condition, when he became concerned with them and knew their oppression in Egypt, thus participating in human brokenness.²¹ With this in mind, the Church is called as well to be a transformative power that persuades in dialogue, rather than simply a unilateral power that coerces and imposes from above. The Church is to see the "opportunity to purify" rather than a "confirmation of fear that we are worthless," and to transform these moments from the latter to the former.

Woundedness, Authority and Compassion

In being in touch with ourselves, our woundedness, and what is happening in society, as well as in the transformative mission that is set out, the Church is much more able to preach its teachings with a transformative power that is authoritative, as well as to continue to be a "leaven and kind of soul for human society."²² This authority is not meant to invoke the usual connotation of authority that is usually carried by figures such as fathers, seniors, and the like. This form of authority is not as influential as it was before, when it was considered a badge of honour to be like one's father and to emulate elders was expected. Now, as Henri Nouwen puts it, people who live in this age form part of a fatherless generation.²³ People are encouraged to make their own mistakes and live their own lives, to choose what they want to be and to be themselves, rather than a copy of someone else. To be a unique individual who blazes his or her own trail is now what is modelled—how many films, songs, or books have been made about someone who chooses their own destiny and does something great, even at the expense of rebelling against traditional authority figures like their parents or certain institutions in their societies. As Henri Nouwen puts it, we all know that "a man's worth is not dependent on what is given to him by his [fore]fathers, but what he makes of himself."²⁴ It is not simply being older and seemingly being wiser that will earn the attention of people today.

This authority that is invoked by the Church is that of compassion and humility, manifested in our hospitality for people, as Nouwen

²¹Bruce Birch, "From Promise to Deliverance," in *What Does the Lord Require?*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Westminster Press, 1985, 38.

²²*Gaudium et Spes*, 40.

²³Henri Nouwen, "Ministry for a Rootless Generation," 30.

²⁴Henri Nouwen, "Ministry for a Rootless Generation," 30.

puts it. Hospitality for Nouwen requires the Church to be at home with herself, to be at home with the fact that the Church is still composed of fallible human beings who share the same characteristics of all the other people in all the rest of the world, and to create a space for the other, a fellow fallible human being. The Church first and foremost ought to be able to pay attention and to listen to people without any intention or thoughts of what the Church can get from the encounter or preoccupation with the Church's own worries. Once the Church can listen, the Church can then be hospitable to others, and to allow others who come and "visit" to acknowledge that their experiences and sufferings can be deepened to a level that can be shared and can thus be a source of healing for others and a point of connection with others. The Church, in her hospitality, can now extend an invitation to people to "come and see," (Cf. Matthew 28:5-7; John 1:46) rather than having to drag unwilling people to hear the message of God for an hour once a week. In thus allowing people to come together in community can we start seeing things from the point of view of the other, and from those who may formerly have been in the margins, and perhaps stop being what Pope Francis calls a "self-referential" Church, that could possibly tend to fall into "theological narcissism" and become a Church that "lives within itself, of itself, and for itself."²⁵ In being inward looking in its becoming at home with herself, it can look outward and now reach out beyond herself, and bring Christ to people through a spirit of dialogue, which is one of, if not the most, important missions of the Church.

The Church is definitely not meant to be out of touch or "somewhere out there or up there," but in the midst of the people. This is something that needs to be prioritized and emphasized, especially when the generation today is that which may not necessarily identify with traditional images or figures of authority—people will not necessarily follow an elder, be it a mother or a father, as this is the traditional view of authority that many now seem to reject or do not think highly of anymore despite these figures also having compassionate and loving characteristics. They are more

²⁵Hans Jurgen Schlamp, "Pope's Reform Path: Francis Shakes Up Church Establishment," *ABC News*.<http://abcnews.go.com/International/popces-reform-path-francis-shakes-church-establishment/story?id=19573297#.UduCSvk3CS0>. Accessed July 9, 2013.

drawn to someone who is “like them” and is a brother or sister, who understands who they are, treats them as equals who have their own thoughts, opinions, and emotions, and allows them the comfort and privilege of self-expression. This is particularly seen in the Philippines in how many people are drawn to many growing charismatic communities and worship sessions where they are able to find God among people who have welcomed them, talked with them, shared common experiences and food with them, and continued to keep in touch with them—hospitality at its finest. This gives the worship sessions of other communities a very warm and personal side to it. The loneliness and isolation felt so intensely by so many people is dispersed through these regular meetings as one body of worshippers who recognize the other individuals in the body as people with a shared human experience of Christ. The Church also celebrates her communal nature through her sacraments, especially seen in the Eucharist, where everyone gathers for table fellowship and everyone is given space and room. However, while the Eucharist is meant to be celebrated as a body of people with a shared human experience of Christ, people do not seem to be able to do so—people are unable to connect with the others who also have this experience in the Eucharist. If one were to look at Catholic masses in the Philippines, one would see Catholic masses wherein the congregation all simply leave after celebrating the Eucharist without really talking with each other or with the priest. It seems that the mass goes only turn to look at, see, and acknowledge the existence of the rest of the congregation and community they are celebrating mass with during the Sign of Peace, or fleetingly acknowledged during the Prayers of the Faithful.

If the Church is to manifest hospitality, as Henri Nouwen puts it, and be an authoritative voice in society, she must recognize the importance of compassion and humility in her ministry. The Church’s compassion draws upon the same compassion of Jesus Christ, who also allowed others to be who they were without reservations or judgements and interacted with them as equals. It is the ability to see in the face of another human being the face of Jesus Christ, and the same values that Jesus Christ saw and valued in others.²⁶ It is also the courage to enter into another’s life and sort through the mess and confusion found there—which, while seeming to be unique and different to each and every person, actually touches

²⁶Henri Nouwen, “Ministry for a Rootless Generation,” 41.

on the common human experience of joy and suffering.²⁷ This entering into another's life, however, is not done in arrogance, with a mind set on "fixing" the other through force; rather, it is done with humility, love, and respect for the person. Again, it is setting aside one's preoccupations, impositions, and intentions in favour of letting the other speak and flourish. Compassion and humility thus go hand in hand. Compassion without humility may become a patronizing messianic complex, while humility without compassion may keep us from fully encountering the other because of our presuppositions or prejudices.

If the "joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the men of this age"²⁸ are truly the same as that of the followers of Christ, and that to be a compassionate and humble minister amongst the people is one of its utmost priorities, if not the utmost priority, then the Church's power is not so much of perfection and being the best or holiest but more of solidarity with people in community. The Church must be able to prepare this hospitable space for such a community where healing can take place, and people can break free from isolation and loneliness and entrust themselves to fellow human beings acknowledging the fact that there is a common human condition that we all share and that we can be a community held together by mutual love rather than mutual fear. Compassion is communal—it is not just found simply in individual works, though it may be expressed through such, but in the fellowship of the Church.²⁹ In such a community, then, the Church would envision that, "...great and heavy burdens become light and easy when lived in the light of blessing. What seemed intolerable becomes a challenge. What seemed a reason for depression becomes a source for purification. What seemed rejection becomes a way to deeper communion."³⁰

What may seem like a crisis in the midst of this contemporary society and growing postmodern culture is actually a learning opportunity and challenge for the Church to gather new insights and to allow its own potentialities to unfold, as new challenges and new cultures and contexts emerge for the community to grapple with and

²⁷Henri Nouwen, "Ministry for a Hopeless Man," 73.

²⁸*Gaudium et Spes*, 1.

²⁹Henri Nouwen, "Community," in *The Only Necessary Thing...*, 128.

³⁰Henri Nouwen, "Belovedness," in *The Only Necessary Thing...*, 74-75.

lead to these new understandings of the faith. To be a minister in contemporary society is becoming the compassionate and humble authority that faces these challenges head on, and in ministering to society, this deeper communion and space for healing and dialogue are vital. Out of this is borne a minister who has the capacity and ability to inspire people into living Christ-like lives and to serve as a witness to the faith. The Church will not be a minister who “goes around nervously trying to redeem people” but a minister who is able “to help others affirm the great news.”³¹

³¹Henri Nouwen, “Ministry for a Rootless Generation,” 44.