

My Experience of Nonviolence in the Philippine People Power Revolt of 1986

The Context

In 1972, then President Marcos declared martial law in the country and became a dictator, vesting himself with both executive and legislative powers through presidential decrees. He had been President for 8 years (2 terms) and could no longer be re-elected according to the constitution. It was a time of turmoil. All basic freedoms (esp. freedom of expression and assembly) were curtailed. All those perceived by Marcos and the military as belonging to the opposition groups were subjected to warrantless arrests. Thousands were tortured and others simply disappeared and were never heard from anymore. As to be expected so many lost hope and decided to join the underground, the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army (CPP-NPA), and waged an armed struggle against the dictatorship. I was a young teacher then and was struggling with what was happening in the country. I wanted the situation to change and yet the option of joining the armed struggle to overthrow the government was an option that I could not consider because killing or harming anyone was something I knew I could not do. In the rallies that I joined prior to the martial law declaration, I could not even mouth the chants that I felt degraded the humanity of another. Many among my colleagues were in a similar quandary and had the same question: what could we do to resist nonviolently?

The Opportunities

What catalyzed the people's nonviolent resistance against the Marcos dictatorship was the murder of opposition leader former Senator Ninoy Aquino when he returned to the Philippines from his exile, on Aug. 21, 1983. The August Twenty-One Movement (ATOM) was organized and soon began an almost-daily mobilization of protest rallies. Soon, other groups followed.

The option of Active Nonviolence or ANV was embraced by those who believed that this was a path of resistance that we could take instead of violence. The Catholic Church took a leading role in this movement. An organization called Aksyon Para sa Kapayapaan at Katarungan (AKKAPKA) was organized and was led by a Jesuit, Fr. Jose Blanco. Many ANV trainings involving various sectors of society were held and I can say that the success of the so-called People Power Revolt of 1986 can be attributed to this ANV movement. The ANV philosophy convinced us that counter-violence and passivity were not the ethical and effective responses to the violence of the Marcos regime. The ANV movement also operationalized an important insight about the nature of political power: that the power of the leaders rests upon the obedience and cooperation of the people. Hence, when the regime committed massive fraud during the snap presidential elections (called by Marcos in 1985 to prove to the world that the people would still vote for him if elections were held at that time), Cory Aquino who ran against Marcos called for a civil disobedience campaign. We boycotted products of a crony company, a crony bank and a crony newspaper. These were owned by Marcos'

cronies or friends who continued to prop up the Marcos regime and in return benefitted from it.

During a military mutiny led by a general and the Defense Minister on February 22, 1986, Cardinal Jaime Sin called on the people, via the Church-owned Radio Veritas, to protect and support the military personnel who have withdrawn their support from Marcos. The Cardinal asked the people to go to a camp where the said military personnel had set up their headquarters and had expected a bloody confrontation with the loyalist military.

In the few days that followed, more and more people poured into the area surrounding the camp, in a massive nonviolent demonstration against the Marcos' dictatorship and involved about 2 million people. It was amazing to experience the nonviolent actions that were taken by the people who were there: we were giving food and flowers to the loyalist soldiers instead of throwing stones at them; we were praying and singing, and carried with us symbols of our Faith. We all disobeyed the curfew that was imposed by Marcos so that the people would be off the streets. There were those who made their bodies the barricade to stop the loyalist tanks from proceeding to the camp to attack those who were holed up there. There was nonviolent persuasion as demonstrators shouted these messages to the loyalist military personnel who were advancing to the camp, (translated into English from Filipino): "Join us, let us not fight each other, we are all Filipinos..." On February 25, Marcos and his family left the Philippines.

Towards a Deeper and Wider Practice within the Catholic Community

As a peace educator, I believe that we have to invest more energy and resources in educating about nonviolence beginning with our Catholic schools and the formation programs for the Catholic religious and laypeople. There is much that we still have to do in this area. We need more workers in this NV vineyard. Catholic organizations have to reach out more, too, to other kindred organizations that may be secular or faith-based to promote the spirituality and practice of nonviolence.

I sincerely hope that our Catholic Church would take the leadership in this. I have long felt that in the last decades of my own existence that globally we have not really strongly spoken about the nonviolence of Jesus. The whole tone and spirit of his life was that of nonviolence and love, and yet so-called Christians have accepted killing whether through the state-sponsored death penalty or through war.

Finally, I believe that we as Catholics have to speak more strongly about delegitimizing war as a means of resolving conflicts. War is an inhumane and immoral institution and needs to be abolished along with the tools that go with war such as more and more destructive armaments, including nuclear weapons.

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