

## **The Hope of the Barren Fig Tree: My discernment on the 2022 Election**

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For many of our poor countrymen, the government is the last hope to better their lives. But, corrupt politics has been the curse of our country. So, how one can make a good decision come election time has always been the concern of Church leaders. And this concern has not been felt so acutely and urgently as in this 2022 election. I wish to share on this topic, specifically on how Ignatian discernment can help in this process. At this point, however, not much can be gained from talking about it in general terms. I believe it is better to talk about it by sharing how I arrived at my decision through my discernment. In the interest of full disclosure, I can't hide the fact that because of my discernment I decided to sign the statement of individual Jesuits supporting Leni and Kiko. Specifically I wish then to share with you my discernment on the 2022 presidential election. I find the image of a barren fig tree from the parable as a fitting image of our prevailing political culture. Hence, I give my talk this title: The Hope of the Barren Fig Tree: My Discernment on the 2022 Election.

Sharing this, I wish to help others make a good decision. The prayer for election by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines reads: that conscience may always be our ultimate norm. I wish nothing less than this here.

To be clear: whatever I say doesn't take away your personal responsibility to decide according to your conscience, that is, to arrive at your own judgment of what your absolute responsibility is in regard to the election. The Church cannot and does not take that from you. Because you alone will be responsible for it before God when the time comes. That's the inalienable and inviolable dignity of your conscience [which, needless to say, neither should be sold for 30 pieces of silver!].

So, if there are things that resonate with you in my sharing and you think will help you in making a good decision, then take them; if not, just ignore them.

1. Can we afford another six years of bad governance?

Thanks to the GS invitation to give this talk, I had the chance to reflect on my discernment in this 2022 election. I realized while I was preparing for this talk that I have a source for this - my facebook timeline posts. It's actually like a diary or an account of my discernment. This account is bookended by my posts on 11 September 2021 and 29 March 2022. The first post was on the young accountants' report on Pharmally and the last one was on the Supreme Court decision on Marcos Jr. 's unpaid estate tax.

After I watched the interview of the young accountants on ANC, I posted this on Facebook:

*I'm so impressed by the work of these young researchers and accountants. They give a glimmer of light to the darkness we are in. There's hope in the Filipino. In their analysis of the Pharmally's financial statements, the one glaring question is why would our government enter into a contract with a company that, in more ways than one, is disadvantageous to the government or - to be more precise, disadvantageous to us Filipinos?*

*Whether one is a Duterte loyalist or not, if you care about the country at all, you should be demanding an explanation from the government for this! And thus far we are not getting any straight answers. Either Duterte and his men attack those who ask this question by finding fault in them or say that previous administrations had done something similar. And they leave it at that as though these answers justify what they are doing now that's gravely harmful to us Filipinos given the pandemic. The amount of money involved is such that one of the accountants calls it the largest (corruption) crisis since WWII!*

*Why in heaven's name does our government look after this Chinese company and not the Filipino people? What does Duterte get from all this? Thanks to the work of these young courageous accountants, these questions are out in the open. Now it is up to us whether we let our government sweep it under the rug or demand an answer. I believe we are at a crossroads.*

This incident was the impulse that got me to seriously think about the coming election. Reflecting on it now has made me realize that it already contained seeds of the things I was going to deal with in regard to this election:

1) The prevailing bad governance and corrupt political culture in our country.

2) The lack of outrage by Filipinos over Pharmally that seemed to show our helplessness before this prevailing culture.

3) Amidst this helplessness, however, there's hope as demonstrated by these young accountants.

4) There are things that are beyond partisan politics. It doesn't matter whether you're green or yellow: if the government abuses its power to enrich itself instead of protecting and serving its people, everyone should be able to demand accountability from it.

5) As in the case of Pharmally, I believe in this 2022 presidential election we are at a crossroads.

Duterte showed that he had no notion at all of the responsibility of his office. He showed that public office was just a way to enrich himself. But, Pharmally was just the last straw for me. Can anyone really pass over the violent deaths he instigated through extrajudicial killings, his being subservient towards the Chinese government while repressive on its own people, his incompetent response to disasters, and so on? All these show Duterte's bad governance.

Not yet a president, but already we see in Marcos Jr. the same corrupt behavior. The Supreme Court 1997 decision on Marcos, Jr. 's estate tax reads:...*The course of action taken by the petitioner (that is, Marcos Jr.) reflects his disregard or even repugnance of the established institutions for governance...*

This is not just a matter of opinion, this is a final judgment of the highest court in the land about Marcos Jr. whose unpaid taxes has now reached Php 203 billion - money that legally belongs to the people, money that could have gone to services badly needed by our people. How can we entrust the highest office in the land to a person like him? His behavior reflects the same prevailing bad politics in our country: A politician who thinks that he is above the law, above accountability.

Bishop Antonio Ledesma, SJ, wrote a piece entitled Disturbing Moral Issues on the Candidacy of FM, JR. I will not give the specifics here. For our purposes, it suffices to just give you the headings:

- 1) Plunder and corruption charges
- 2) Tax evasion and moral turpitude
- 3) Re-interpreting the iniquities of martial law, and
- 4) Deliberate and widespread disinformation

Is this really the kind of president we want? Can the country afford to have a president like him for the next 6 years?

## 2. What can we learn from Ignatius about discernment?

At this point, let me incorporate what I have learned from Ignatius' rules for discernment as I tried to apply them to this 2022 election.

- 1) The object of discernment and choice here is - who should I vote for?
- 2) By definition, discernment is the process of determining from the source whether something is of God or not.
- 3) Discernment is always done in the context of prayer, for it is God's gift to those who ask Him for it. After the post on Pharmally, I posted a prayer that I composed *A Prayer for a Good Decision in the Coming Election*.
- 4) The word *discernment* is used by Ignatius in two different contexts - the first week rules for discernment and the second week rules for discernment. The first week is a discernment between good and evil, while the second week is a discernment between two goods. The discernment in the second week is what, properly speaking, discernment is for Ignatius. Here, it is to discern which between two good options does God want for me. This is where the search for magis is. Now, is the 2022 election a second week kind of discernment and choice? No. To my judgment the 2022 election is a first week kind of discernment and choice, that is, a choice between good and evil. Of course here, it is clear that the evil choice can't be of God. Here the choice should be clear. Ang Diyos mismo ang nag-utos: Huwag kang magkakaroon ng ibang diyos-diyosan, Huwag kang magnanakaw, Huwag kang magsisinungaling, etc.

5) Indifference (that is, having the interior freedom to not let one's attachments determine one's decisions) is the needed disposition to be able to make a good discernment. In the context of the first week rules, Ignatius says that the bad spirits put obstacles in the way of the person to keep him in his bad ways or to prevent him from moving from bad to good.

In the context of helping the JHS department in their discernment, I asked them to reflect on these questions:

i) What are the practices or reasons for voting that prevent one from making a good decision? What do you think is the most serious one?

ii) What are the practices or reasons for voting present in social media that can prevent one from making a good decision in the election? What do you think is the most serious one?

In answer to the first question, they zeroed in on selling and buying votes. In answer to the second question, they unanimously say: disinformation. To save time, I won't comment on these answers except to say that these obstacles (which Ignatius speaks of) are reflective of the bad politics in our country.

### 3. What is the role of the Church?

The other thing that I encounter in my discernment, which I feel is a more basic issue, is the question of what precisely is the role of the Church in this election?

Among Church leaders there are two camps. One camp insists that even in this case of this 2022 election the Church should remain non-partisan. The other camp believes that, yes, the Church should be non-partisan but it cannot be neutral. The former argues that the Church's proper place is in the moral and the spiritual and that it has no role in the political. The Church can provide general principles, but the decision should be left to the individual voters. Thus says the first camp. The second camp, however, believes that, yes, when the choice is between two goods, it is better for the Church, as it were, to step back in order for the voters to make their own decisions. But, (and this is the fundamental difference - the distinction I made earlier between the first week discernment and the second week discernment) if the situation is between two choices, one

representing bad governance and the other representing good governance - the choice is clear - bad governance can never be of God! This is how I interpret the two pastoral letters by the CBCP. The CBCP is not simply taking a non-partisan stance. Though there are no names mentioned one can read between the lines. We can say the same thing about the statement issued by the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines. They are not simply taking a non-partisan stance either. Again no names, but it's clear who's who. Also part of this second camp is Bishop Ledesma, SJ, who explicitly raises issue with Marcos Jr. And, feeling that this was not enough, there are individual Jesuits who explicitly express their support for Leni and Kiko. As I already confessed, I belong to this group in the second camp.

Sometimes there are things that are beyond mere partisan politics! And the feeling in this second camp is, if the Church is to be true to its role, it cannot remain neutral in the face of evil. In situations when justice requires it, when the common good demands it, the Church can't remain silent. If it doesn't do anything in the face of evil it would be making itself complicit to this evil! To remain neutral in the face of evil would be a betrayal of who they are as shepherds of souls, a betrayal of God, and of their country!

#### 4. Is there hope?

Thank God, besides the bad choice, there is also a real good choice. Just as the young accountants were a sign of hope, so is Leni. Leni represents our hope in changing the corrupt political culture. If I am to articulate why Leni: I would say of all the candidates she truly represents from the beginning the true opposition to the prevailing corrupt governance. She represents a different kind of governance - one that has been tested and proven in her capacity as vice-president despite the lack of support and even red-tagging of the Duterte government. She has shown a style of leadership that has a genuine care for those on the fringes of the Society and a style of leadership that promotes participative governance, one that involves as many as possible those of the civil society and non-governmental organizations in the governance. She believes that this way we can better respond to the pressing needs of our country.

The parable of the barren fig tree gives us a good image of our situation. The owner of an orchard tells his gardener: *For three years, I have been coming to*

*this tree looking for fruit, but I have not found any. So, cut it down, why should it continue to exhaust the soil?* In reply the gardener says: *Sir, let us keep it for another year. I will cultivate around it and fertilize it, maybe it would bear fruit; if not then you can cut it down.* Our bad political culture is like the barren fig tree. But, it is not without hope, our Lord has provided us signs of hope. And now He is giving us the chance in this election to make it bear fruit for our people.