

# Truth, power, love and money

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Not too long ago, a couple of bishops of the Catholic Church who were attending an important meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) were invited to have a meal with some Malacañang officials. The purpose of the meeting ostensibly was to brief the prelates on what the government was doing to address certain issues over which the Church had expressed some concern.

As they stood up from the table at the end of the meal, the bishops found themselves being given envelopes containing money. The Palace assistants mumbled that the cash was meant to cover "expenses" and "air fare." One of the bishops, Archbishop Antonio Ledesma, who was the CBCP vice president at the time, politely refused the envelope. The media reported the incident, and Archbishop Ledesma confirmed that indeed it happened. The good bishop, one of the most decent men in the Church hierarchy today, must have been totally dismayed by this improper and insulting act. For he had traveled to Manila from Mindanao, where he is based, to attend the CBCP meeting, and not to confer with representatives of the President. There was no reason for them to pay his expenses.

But, presumably, for the men of the Palace, this was standard practice. A year later, it was the turn of legislators and a few chosen local government officials to be treated to the same presidential "generosity." After attending a meeting in Malacañang, in which they were briefed about the Palace's position on the looming impeachment case against President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, the guests were sent home with a small gift bag containing cash. Pampanga Gov. Eddie Panlilio, who was at the meeting, opened the bag after boarding his car, and found a half million pesos in cash. He was neither made to sign for it, nor was he informed what the money was for. Later, he made an effort to return the money, but no one in Malacañang was prepared to receive it.

Apart from the ordinary languages we use in our daily life, there are other means available for communicating meaning to other people. The most significant of these, the sociologist Niklas Luhmann says, are truth, power, love and money. The function of these "symbolic media of communication," as he calls them, is the same as that of language—to ensure a common understanding among participants in an interaction, and to prompt the other into making a desired selection from a set of possible actions.

To know this is to begin to understand how "money talks," why "truth will set us free," how "power corrupts," and why "love is the language of the heart." In modern society, these symbolic media are assigned their specific spheres, where they facilitate the transmission and processing of sometimes very complex messages. Truth becomes the language of science (or of religion in early societies), power becomes the medium of politics, love (or friendship) that of the family, and money the principal medium of economic exchange.

In modern societies where social relationships are highly differentiated, people take care not to switch from one medium to another within the same relationship. To do so would be to sow confusion. Thus, you do not give a priest some money in the confessional box to pay for your sins.

You are not allowed to buy votes. Likewise, it is not regarded as good form to invoke love or friendship to gain acceptance for a political program. You cannot use love as payment for a house or a car without putting your identity and self-respect in doubt. And you cannot use power to define the truth, or to secure love, just as you cannot buy truth and love.

The surest sign of dysfunction in any relationship or institutional system is the employment of an extraneous medium for communicating and directing meanings. A parent tries to stabilize the love of his children by lavishing them with money and material things. A scientist shapes his truths according to the requirements of the powerful or in response to market demands. A politician wins public office by using wealth rather than the power of persuasion. A judge offers his decisions to the highest bidder, or bends the law to accommodate political power. And a businessman enlists the help of a politician to ensure the success of his enterprise, or to prevent it from being taken away from him.

It is the misfortune of our society that our leaders cannot grasp the systemic nature of our recurrent crises. Our political system has been hobbled by our inability to elect leaders with unquestioned legitimacy who can inspire the nation with their vision. Our economic system is heavily politicized and dominated by parasitic rent-seekers. Our judicial system is so severely compromised it cannot muster enough authority and credibility to settle disputes and persistent conflicts. Our families and our communities have quietly borne the brunt of these crises and, unless we act now, we may soon wake up to find we're no longer a nation.

These problems are not unique to us. They are an integral part of the troubled transition to modernity. But, the conditions that would hasten this passage are already upon us. We only need to focus our collective will on the immediate tasks that lie ahead. We can begin by ensuring that we have credible and orderly elections in 2010. Yet, clearly, we cannot do that until the Arroyo regime finally accepts that its time is over.

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**P.S.**

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