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# A LETTER TO CFC TORONTO

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My dear brothers and sisters of the Couples for Christ and Family Ministries:

## Part One

Some members of the CFC family in Toronto have requested a copy of my presentation at Blessed John XXIII Church on Thursday, September 6, 2007, on issues affecting our community. I gave the presentation in my capacity as the liaison of the Archdiocese of Toronto to the Couples for Christ and by extension to the rest of Canada. What I write in these pages are personal reflections and suggestions, which may help you in your discernment process.

When the problem was first brought to my attention, my immediate response was: "Listen to your founders because they often exercise a prophetic role even if they are no longer in leadership positions." The statement has been repeated so many times and to my chagrin, the statement has even become a way to persuade people to join the "restoration" group.

A few days ago, I informed Francis Berroya and Ron Falcon to stop using my statement in their future correspondences because the context in which I spoke these words has changed dramatically in the last few days. The statement, therefore, needs to be qualified.

We cannot negate the fact that Frank Padilla is one, if not, the Founder of Couples for Christ. If my previous statement is true, then this is what Frank Padilla wrote in his letter dated September 1, 2007: *For CFC in other countries, you can try to insulate yourself from the conflict in Manila and wait until the dust settles, and in the meantime just go on with your own life and mission. You may however work internally for the restoration of CFC in your country, for as long as that is possible.* Frank Padilla exhorts us to do the following:

1. To insulate ourselves from the conflict in Manila.
2. To wait until the dust settles
3. To go on with our own life and mission
4. To work internally [not separately, *sic*] for the restoration of CFC [as some of us want to do, *sic*].

I trust that Frank Padilla was sincere when he wrote these words, and I pray that all in Toronto would heed what he says particularly those sections which directly affect us. But, as it is, there are so-called "leaders" who seem to be intent in dividing CFC Toronto. If you must separate, then separate, and stop calling yourselves CFC. You are not helping CFC. You are not also helping yourselves. Do not be naïve. For every time, someone ask you the reason for the existence of two separate CFC's in Toronto, you will always be opening old wounds.

Allow me, my brothers and sisters, to raise the question: Has CFC Toronto (and I mean Toronto, not United States, not even Manila, but Toronto) veered away from the ideals of the Movement? If your answer is "yes," then I ask you to name those areas (You need to be specific) which you think have changed the direction of the Movement in Toronto. If your answer is "no," then what is to restore? Aren't you barking on the wrong tree?

Granting that you have issues, which you think have changed the direction of the Movement in Toronto, let me also ask you, and are these issues dividing-issues? Can these issues not be worked out within the group and without the need to divide?

Let us take our inspiration from the tradition of our Church. You know, when our bishops reflected on the Church during the Second Vatican Council, they said that *the Church, embracing sinners in her bosom, is at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, and incessantly pursues the path of penance and renewal* (Lumen Gentium 8). CFC is our way of being church. CFC received a special anointing from God and for that reason we may consider it to be holy, but since it is run by men and women, CFC needs to undergo purification on an ongoing basis just as each one is called to ongoing conversation each day until Christ will come in glory.

## Part Two

One of the accusations of the “restoration group” towards the International Council is disobedience to the bishops. You may not realize it, my brothers and sisters, for the last twenty five years, the culture which you have fostered within CFC is a top-down approach to authority. It is not surprising then, that when the three bishops recommended for the postponement of the election, you have understood it to be an order. And yet, in the recent article published on September 6, 2007 in CBCP News Online, Bishop Gabriel Reyes said that the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) *has no authority over the Couples for Christ in the national level. It can only make recommendations to the Couples for Christ.* And again, Bishop Reyes says, *only the Vatican, through the Pontifical Council of the Laity (PCL), has the authority over it in the national and international level, although every diocesan bishop has power to deny permission to CFC to function in his diocese, even if the association is international.* It is clear that the three bishops: Bishop Reyes, Bishop Villegas, Archbishop Lagdameo were merely making recommendations. I would probably not be far from the truth. The bishops made recommendations because of their love and concern for CFC. This is an exercise of authority: to unify the community and to direct its attention to God who is the center of life for each and all the members of the community.

Obedience for the sake of obedience can be sheer domination. Our problem begins, my dear brothers and sisters, when we become totally dependent on the ideas and directions of another in a blind and unexamined way. These are the bare facts:

1. The resignation of Frank Padilla and company
2. The recommendation of the Bishops
3. The 13-man committee assigned to study the situation and make recommendations
4. The elders’ assembly
5. The election of the members of the International Council

What we have before us is perhaps unprecedented in the twenty-five years of CFC. Rather than just following the Bishops’ recommendations, the elders’ assembly, through a **process of prayerful discernment** in which they listened to all the parties including the recommendations of the 13-man committee, decided a course of action, though unpopular, nevertheless, corresponds to the traditional custom of voting for seven men for a fixed term of two years. We may not like the outcome of that decision, but we must at least respect the process that took place, because that process, though imperfect, is an exercise of the freedom we are given in Jesus Christ. During that discernment, the elders’ assembly did three things, which I believe, is the right thing to do in any discernment process, namely:

1. Seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit
2. Listening to all the voices (consultation)
3. The practice of reflexivity, acknowledging the movement character of the group in contrast to being overly concerned with its tradition-directed character.

To be honest with you, I am not impressed by the decision of some to separate merely on the basis of the result of the election process. I have seen this too often within the Filipino community abroad. There are so many groups, both civic and religious, maintaining their own turfs, not because of a noble purpose (although they may be claiming to do so), but because their leaders at some point have been disenfranchised. I pray that no one among you should fall prey to this type of behavior. CFC members should try their best to be more sensible, slow to anger, and abounding in grace and humility.

### **Part III**

During the past few weeks, I have been praying for you. As I was celebrating the Mass, I was struck by the gospel reading from St. Luke:

*When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.*

Jesus returns to Nazareth, where he grew up. As was his custom, he went to the synagogue on Saturday morning to worship. As the gospel tells us, Jesus was invited to read from the lessons of the day. The text chosen was from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, an amalgam of two different passages: Isaiah 61.1-2 and Isaiah 58.6. After the lesson was read, Jesus applied this passage to himself, and basically gave an inaugural speech outlining the key themes of his intended public ministry.

Jesus applied this passage to himself. Is this not what all of us should do? How does the passage apply to us today? Is not CFC the extension of the ministry of Christ? If one stays with the text long enough, one hears in it not only an announcement of what God has accomplished in Jesus, but also a call to service, a call to join that ministry Jesus began and defined.

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me...*

Jesus claims to be the anointed servant of the Lord. I have read so many emails from CFC members concerning the issues before us. Some of the emails refer to an "anointing from above." We are all anointed by virtue of our baptism into Christ. We claim a special anointing for CFC as it tries to fulfill its mission. CFC started as an outreach to married couples, then as the years went by kids, youth, singles, handmaids, and servants were included. As CFC continued to reflect on the life and ministry of Christ, it began also to address the cry of the poor and as a concrete answer to that cry, Gawad Kalinga (GK) came into being.

*To bring good news to the poor*

Part of the mission of Jesus and our mission too is to preach the gospel to the poor. What poor and in what sense, one may ask? There is no reason why the term should not mean among other things the financially poor; but it will certainly include poverty of other kinds. There is poverty when marriages fail. There is poverty when children are not educated according to gospel values. There is poverty when people live alone and have no one to turn to in their hour of need. When the Church truly preaches good news to the poor, it designates a significant resources, financial and human, to support the anointed message. Otherwise, our preaching will be inadequate. It will not raise the level of awareness, which is necessary to effect changed behavior in the world around us.

*He has sent me to proclaim release to captives*

Part of the mission of Jesus and our mission too is to proclaim release to captives. In the time of Jesus, this would mean imprisoned debtors. For us in North America, this is well too common when our spending habits ran wild and max our credit cards. The word "release" (aphesin or aphasis in Greek) means forgiveness. It carried a broad range of meanings including release, let go, discharge, release from captivity. A broad application would also include those who may be imprisoned because of their own biases and prejudices. It may also include those whom we hold captive because of our inability to receive forgiveness or to offer forgiveness.

Several years ago, I was studying the Lord's Prayer in the original language of Jesus, which was Aramaic. Anyone who speaks several languages knows that in translation something eventually gets lost. I was struck to discover that the prayer "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us," carries with it this idea of knotting. When you take a string and create a knot in the middle of that string, as you pull both ends of that string, the knot you created will become tighter. As you continue to pull the string further, the tighter the knot becomes and the harder it will be to untangle it. Every time we sin against God or one another, we create a knot. Every time we do not ask for forgiveness or extend forgiveness, we tighten the knot. Eventually, the knot becomes too tight and it would be near impossible to free anyone from a tangled or a twisted state.

*And recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free*

Recovery of sight to the blind could refer to those who are physically blind. It could also mean spiritually blind. Many in the synagogue that morning were undoubtedly extremely religious but spiritually blind. The world is full of religious people and religious movements, but any person or any movement without the Spirit of the Living God is a blind person or a blind movement.

In the Old Testament, these words of Isaiah spoke of concrete acts of deliverance, the setting free of captives, the announcement of release to people in slavery. In effect, they have to do with all the experiences of human bondage, which the men and women of Israel experienced as a nation and as individuals. The prophetic words both declared God's delivering work through his anointed and called the nation as a whole and each individual to commit themselves to that task of freeing the prisoner and the oppressed.

*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*

CFC has been doing its best to follow the Savior's lead. We are not only reaching to out to married couples, to children, to young adults, to single men and women; we are also successfully and surprisingly heeding the cry of the poor.

*Is this not Joseph's son?*

Jesus described the incredible arrival of the Lord's favor to the people that Sabbath morning. His message, however, was not well-received. I suspect that it impinge on their comfort zones and with their small-town attitude they were unable to comprehend the amazingly good that Jesus intended to inaugurate.

The work of Gk is so far-reaching; going well beyond the imagination of your founders and fellow members. Like some of the people that Sabbath morning in Nazareth, some are asking: "Is this CFC?" *Truly I tell you, Jesus says, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown.*

"We want to restore!" sounds like what our Lord said, *doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we heard you did at Capernaum.*

*But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was severe famine over the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarepath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.*

My dear brothers and sisters, notice the recipients of God's goodness. The widow of Zarepath and Naaman the Syrian were non-Jews. Salvation is meant for everyone!

What is salvation? In God's great love for the human family, God desires that each person be saved, that is, to spend an eternity of happiness with Him in heaven. The Church carries out this mission in bringing salvation to all persons in a variety of ways. Three are more important than anything else:

1. Bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to all cultures (evangelization)
2. Helping its members to grow into an ever closer relationship with God (sanctification)
3. Working to establish God's plan for the human family (the reign of God)

We cannot isolate one dimension from the other. We can try to strike a balance, but experience tells us that as we journey through life one will take precedence depending on the situation we are in.

The Church, as it imitates the Savior, put's a high value on the establishment of the reign of God. In a world that is increasingly forgetful of the Creator, the establishment of the reign of God would mean that we work to establish belief in the existence of a Creator, who is also love. To establish the reign of God on earth also means that we love our brothers and sisters in the human family. We cannot effectively love them when they are denied sufficient food and a roof to live in, when their basic human rights are violated through injustice, and when thousands of people are displaced and die.

A woman came to my office several months ago asking for help. She told me about her sister and children who are lingering in a refugee camp in Pakistan. She asked me if it is possible to assist in bringing her sister and children to Canada. My initial reaction was, why come to me. You are a Moslem. Why don't you go to your Imam? She left. Several days later, she came back. I again denied her request. A month later, she came back and this time I said yes. With the supervision of Cross-cultural Services (an agency supported by ShareLife), I signed the papers that will hopefully allow her family to come to Canada as refugees. Will she become a Catholic? Only God knows. What is important for her and her family to be reunited and to have a place where they can start anew.

Earlier, I have referred you to the suggestion of Frank Padilla to isolate yourselves from the conflict in Manila. Implicit in that statement is the recognition that the context of CFC Manila is different from the context in which we are in. We need to learn to cut our umbilical cord. As parents, you know, that at some point your children will have to move out of the house, assert their independence, in order for them to grow and become the person God wanted them to be. If you don't, you have scarred them for life. Dependence is an obstacle to psychological growth. The dependent person become the other instead of him or herself. Dependence is not a virtue. It is a substitute for character. In a similar manner, CFC Toronto needs to recognize that CFC Manila will always be her parent community, but CFC Manila needs to allow CFC Toronto to chart its own course of action in order for it to mature. CFC Toronto has much to offer. As one priest said last Thursday night, it is not by accident that we are here in in this city.

The context of the Philippines is not our context in Toronto. And yet, we constantly refer matters to Manila. We even appoint coordinators who are not resident of Toronto (or Canada for that matter). Let us take the case of Ecumenism as this is an issue raised in some of emails I received. In the Philippine context, ecumenism is generally suspect. Proselytism is a major concern. Partnership and cooperation are virtually non-existent. Canada, on the other hand, is a "mosaic" of cultures. We come from every corner of the globe. Toleration and cooperation is our way of life. We are open to appreciating the other as gift. When I give a gift to someone, I make sure that the gift I am giving is something that the recipient will benefit from. How many gifts have you received, only to wrap it and give it to somebody else because you already have it or you have no use for it?

I love Canada and I am grateful to God each day for bringing me to this land. It is here that I have begun to appreciate the gift of the other. It is here that I have experienced concretely what the Second Vatican Council says in the Document on Ecumenism no. 12, *Cooperation among Christians (Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, Eastern) vividly expresses the bond which already unites them...such cooperation...should contribute to a just appreciation of the dignity of the human person, the promotion of the blessings of peace, the application of gospel principles to social life, and the advancement of the arts and sciences in a Christian spirit. Christians should also work together in the use of every possible means to relieve the afflictions of our times, such as famine and natural disasters, illiteracy and poverty, lack of housing, and the unequal distribution of wealth. Through such cooperation all believers in Christ are able to learn how to esteem each other more and how the road to the unity of Christians may be made more smooth.* Ironically, the personal parish of the Filipino Catholics in Toronto for the last 25 years, is located at Blessed John XXIII Church, which also happens to be a shared worship space with our separated brothers and sisters, the Presbyterians. This arrangement would be unthinkable in the Philippine context.

And again, with regards to non-Christians, the Second Vatican Council has this to tell us: *The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless, often reflect a ray of the the Truth which enlightens all men...The Church, therefore, has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly, thorough dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture.* (Declaration on the relation of the church with non-Christian religions no. 2) Indeed, we do not need to question people if they want to participate in our work. Let us offer them the chance to reach out to people who are poor and marginalized. Remember, it is not us whom they serve. It is Jesus.

*When they heard this, all in the synagogue wer filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff*

In another passage of Sacred Scriptures, the seed that was planted has become a huge tree. CFC was the seed that was planted many years ago. Look how it has grown. The trunk (Couples) has now many branches (CFC-kids, CFC-youth, CFC-singles, CFC-handmaids, CFC-servants, CFC-GK). Many birds have perched on its branches; many more have come under its shade. People are coming from everywhere to support the work that you do. As chaplain of the Filipino community in the Archdiocese of Toronto, I am invited to so many functions and I am amazed at the level of enthusiasm from non-CFC members who wish to participate in the work of GK. This is the level of awareness, which is necessary to effect changed behavior that I have mentioned earlier. These are signs of God's goodness to you. Celebrate it! Do not allow the tree to be cut in two!

At the Second Vatican Council, the bishops recognized the scandal of division among Christians – a scandal that impedes the proclamation of the gospel and so they resolve to pursue the path of unity. But if you, my dear brothers and sisters, cannot be persuaded otherwise, then hear what the scriptures says:

*But Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on his way.*

Let us pass through the midst of all these problems and go our own way.

