

Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (ECMI)  
Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP)

Press Release

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of February the Catholic Church in the Philippines will celebrate the 16<sup>th</sup> National Migrants' Sunday. For almost two decades the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines has dedicated the first Sunday of Lent each year as a day of prayer and solidarity with People on the Move. In the mind of the bishops are especially the almost 8 million Filipinos scattered in more than 190 nations in the world. There has been many attempts to persuade the bishops to transfer the National Migrants' Sunday to other dates coinciding with the celebration organized by different migrant-related government agencies. The bishops have maintained that in a very real sense the first Sunday of Lent is most fitting moment to recall the sufferings and sacrifices of many of our country men and women forced to exile because of economic ills of the country. The prayerful observation during Lent underlines also the Church's hope for salvation for the Filipino migrants through solutions which the Philippine government is not only in a position to provide but a responsibility it has the duty to fulfill.

This year the Church has reason to pray even more intensely, because such salvation seems far from the minds of many of our leaders. The Church believes that if indeed this nation values the sacrifices of the Overseas Filipinos, many of them, contract workers, they must be given the complete exercise of their rights. President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, in her State of the Nation Address in July 13, 2001 declared a "priority measure" the proposed Absentee Voting Bill. She said: "I ask Congress to enact a law giving overseas Filipinos, who continue to play critical role in the country's economic and social stability, the right to vote." We, bishops, agree 100% with the President in this. We cannot ignore the voice of OFWs in Hongkong, Taiwan, Japan, Italy and Denmark who in 1999, through the Philippine Migrants' Rights Watch have demanded to be allowed to vote simply because it is their right. The CBCP through the Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples (ECMI) conducted in November and December last year another survey with the help of chaplains and Pastoral Workers of Filipinos Overseas. The partial results showed an overwhelming trend to the Filipinos overseas desire to be treated as full pledged citizens. Truly Asia's first and most unique democracy should not keep on denying this constitutional right to the millions considered economic heroes of the land.

Shamelessly however, many of our legislators seem to be footdragging on this very serious task. The way the proposed bill is being treated the Overseas Filipinos will still have no voice even during the 2007 elections. Are the present crop of senators and congress people afraid of the Absentee Voting Bill? Some warn about the possible election fraud that can result from the AVB. Does not the 1987 Philippine Constitution in Article V, Sections 1 and 2 provide for the qualifications for voting, making it mandatory for Congress to provide a system for securing the secrecy and sanctity of the ballot as well as a system for absentee voting for qualified Filipinos abroad? Do the lawmakers intend to solve electoral frauds by depriving citizens the right to vote. Or

should they rather make laws both to enable all citizens the full exercise of their rights while at the same time assuring the truthful expression of their will.

In the midst of this reluctance to pass swiftly this priority bill, lawmakers are preparing for overseas consultation. After the overwhelming expression of support for the AVB here and abroad, many lawmakers seem to be only after the travels at the expense of people's money, mostly remittances from OFWs on the shallow pretext of consulting them. Isn't this another sign of unscrupulous exploitation? For the last fifteen years their eagerness to be treated as full citizens – not so much as heroes, just citizens –and until now the lawmakers are still in the consulting stage. Or do they just want to travel at the expense of the very citizens they refuse the right of suffrage. Where indeed there are heroes, there must be villains. If the OFWs are heroes, who are the villains?

On the occasion of the 16<sup>th</sup> National Migrants' Sunday, let us all pray that the OFWs will soon see the people and leaders of this nation sincerely treating them heroes by giving them their full citizens' right. Let us pray that the lawmakers will soon pass the bill to enable them to vote in the year 2004. We appeal to the lawmakers to save the millions they will use for consultation instead to help the OFWs in trouble, like those imprisoned in Saudi Arabia or to provide for employment for them when they return to the homeland.

BISHOP RAMON C. ARGUELLES, DD

Chairperson

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