God Hears the Cries of the Poor  (cf. Exodus 3, 7-9)
Concluding Statement of the CBCP on the Second National Rural Congress

Poverty is a reality that pervades our beloved country. It is experienced all over the land but is especially felt in the rural sector. Poverty in the Philippines remains predominantly rural and development projects have not significantly improved the lives of the rural poor. In fact, we can never solve poverty in the urban centers unless poverty in the countryside is seriously and systematically addressed. Hence 40 years after the National Rural Congress of 1967, we bishops in our pastoral statement “Dignity of the Rural Poor” of January 2007 called for a Second National Rural Congress (NRC II) to hear the cries of the poor in the rural areas. Pope Benedict XVI reminds us in his message on the World Day of Peace of this year that fighting poverty is a means of building peace. So to address poverty benefits not only the poor but the whole nation.

The Journey of NRC II

The Second National Rural Congress (NRC II) consisted of more than 50 Diocesan and 13 Sub-Regional Consultations conducted through November 2007 to March 2008. Afterwards, five Regional Rural Congresses were convened in April- June 2008. These consultations led up to a National Conference on 7- 8 July 2008 held in San Carlos Seminary, Makati. All these activities gave the opportunity to the rural poor to articulate their concerns and for the Church in various levels to listen and discern her specific role in accompanying them in their journey.

A parallel track of several researches, seminars and high-level caucuses was completed during the same period. These activities involved the academe, media, civil society, government officials and bishops themselves. Various position papers and statements were compiled to aid and supplement the consultations that came about in the NRC II process.

Voices of the Rural Poor

The researches, consultations and dialogues unearthed several causes of rural poverty. Foremost is the lack of serious implementation of laws and policies designed to address asset reforms to promote social justice. Inadequate resources and capacities to provide basic services were also mentioned. Other major concerns were the prevailing graft and corruption and sense of helplessness – that there is nothing anyone can do to change the situation. The extensive presence of extractive industries, foremost, of which I large scale mining, destroys the environment which directly impacts the poor. On the other hand, it
was recognized that the rural poor need to discern more their rights and responsibilities as citizens and as children of God. Five basic sectors articulated the complex challenges they face today.

**Small Farmers and Landless Workers:** They are the rural sector that today has the single most urgent claim on the conscience of the nation whose most pressing need is land reform. Academic studies and numerous documentations by civil society have attested to the significant contribution of agrarian reform in reducing poverty, creating opportunities for growth leading towards sustainable development. These gains must not only be protected and sustained, but expanded to cover all legitimate beneficiaries of agrarian reform. Despite efforts to raise these concerns we are saddened to find that elected representatives do not heed the voices of their poor constituents.

The small farmers call for basic services in the development of the countryside, such as irrigation systems, farm to market roads, lending facilities and access to the market. The farmers in many places are suffering from large scale mining and continuous conversion of agricultural lands to non-agricultural use to avoid being converted by the land reform program.

**Fisherfolk.** They call for the strict implementation of the Fisheries Code, including its review to address loopholes in its implementation. The fisherfolk also identify specific issues such as limited access to municipal waters, pollution of our waters, the practice of destructive and illegal fishing methods, and the encroachment by commercial trawlers into municipal waters. They further call for more programs that would enhance the capacities of their sector. They reiterate the need to promote the sustainable utilization of natural resources in our seas, rivers and lakes, including the establishment of sanctuaries where marine life can regenerate itself.

**Indigenous People:** They demand the recognition of the customary laws and culture of the indigenous people (IP) communities, the intensified implementation and review of the Indigenous People’s Rights Act (IPRA), the recognition of the continuing threat to their communities posed by destructive mining and logging activities, by armed conflict between the rebels and the military and by the entrance of companies causing their displacement, the watered-down application of the Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) process, and the strengthening of the National Commission of Indigenous People (NCIP) so that it truly represent the interests of the indigenous peoples and not the foreigners and big business enterprise.

**Rural Women:** They insist on the need to protect and uphold the welfare and rights of women through the enhancement of Filipino values of family and moral responsibility. They also appeal to all concerned agencies to provide more support to respond to the special needs of women, such as the issues of domestic violence, access to basic services,
livelihood, health, natural family planning, continuing formation of conscience in regard to the right to life, and awareness building on women’s rights.

**Rural Youth:** They seek more effective pastoral care to strengthen the moral and spiritual foundations of the youth. They ask that the Church and the academe reinforce their programs on spiritual and values formation, in order to equip the youth with proper guidance and opportunities to lead them in their growing and maturing years. They request that we promote education in terms of tertiary or technical-vocational training to prepare them for meaningful livelihood or employment.

**Our Commitments**

Scripture warns us: “*He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor will himself also call and not be heard*” (Prov. 21, 13). Impelled by the voices of the rural poor and guided by the social teachings of the Church on justice, preferential option for the poor and the common good, we make the following resolutions:

We continue to put in place venues for dialogue, where the poor can interact with the Bishops and other leaders of the Catholic Church. We shall activate specialized desks within the church structures that would help the rural poor at the parish, diocesan, regional and national levels.

We shall intensify our engagement with our public officials in the legislation and implementation of social justice measures, as we did with a letter addressed to Congress asking for CARP extension with reform.

We shall capacitate the people in the rural areas by continuous work of organizing Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) and groups that are conscious of their rights and duties and help each other to work for integral development in the light of the Gospel of Christ.

We shall encourage our lay faithful to intensify their fight against graft and corruption, and accompany upright public officials in their efforts to serve the people in transparency and truth.

We shall direct Church institutions and organizations to be more engaged in works of solidarity, justice and charity for the poor in rural areas. We shall also call on them to be more actively engaged in protecting and promoting the integrity of creation.

Finally, we shall strive to be faithful to live out our mission as the Church of the Poor – a Church which is both engaged in the work of integral evangelization, as well as in Social Reform. Such actions emanate from the Pauline vision of “uniting all things under Christ” (Eph 1: 10) – to engage the world as we
bear witness to the plight of the poor, through profound conversion and renewal as People of God.

We are a people of hope. Our faith bids us to rely on Our Father who is Lord of History. His Kingdom will sure come when “love and truth will meet; justice and peace will embrace” (Ps 85, 111). Therefore sustained by our faith that God loves the poor, we entrust these commitments under the care and guidance of Mary, the Comforted of the Afflicted and Mother of Hope.

For the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines,

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