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# Gawad Kalinga pioneer sidesteps rift in 'Couples for Christ'

By Jeannette Andrade  
Inquirer

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MANILA, Philippines -- Antonio Meloto is downplaying a split in the Catholic Church lay group Couples for Christ (CfC) that underpinned his highly successful Gawad Kalinga (GK) housing program to build a nation without slums, declaring "we are working more, talking less."

The influential Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines was set to discuss the issue sometime this week, Church sources said, highlighting the gravity of the division in the movement established in the Philippines in 1981 and now has more than one million members in 160 countries.

Meloto, 57, whose work in Gawad Kalinga won for him and his organization the Ramon Magsaysay Award -- Asia's version of the Nobel Prize -- for community leadership in 2006, spoke to the Philippine Daily Inquirer on Saturday, a week after CfC co-founder Frank Padilla announced his breakaway.

Padilla has formed the Restoration Movement, also called the Easter Group, according to a letter circulated in the United States by Ricky Cuenca, US coordinator of CfC, one of the world's largest Catholic lay organizations.

"Couples for Christ and Gawad Kalinga are very much together. Gawad Kalinga remains a project of the Couples for Christ," said Meloto, who stepped aside as executive director of GK in February purportedly to become an international ambassador of goodwill.

The February announcement then said GK was going global to improve the lives of the countless poor in other countries and that Meloto was to join Padilla, who also was GK chair, in the initiative.

"Walang iwanan (Nobody leaves)," Meloto then said.

Padilla in February resigned as member of the CfC council, the organization's governing body, along with two other officials, according to the Cuenca report.

Over the weekend, during the launch of the two-day GK Township Development Summit at University of the Philippines, Meloto acknowledged the rift in the CfC and GK, CfC's flagship housing and development project, that he attempted to keep under wraps.

Asked about Padilla's claim that GK was veering away from CfC's primary work of evangelization, Meloto said: "Our work in Gawad Kalinga is not a deviation but an expansion into the fullness of life and mission as CfC. The reason that some think that GK is taking a different direction is because we may be disrupting conventions. We are working more, talking less."

He spoke about Padilla's accusations that the GK was accepting donations even from corporations manufacturing artificial birth control products, contradicting the CfC's pro-life stance.

"GK is nonpartisan. We do not take any side in building a nation in the same manner that we do not pass judgment on any corporation that we engage. We do not even ask them what their (corporations) products are as long as they want to help," Meloto explained.

He stressed that the GK motto for the most part is: "Engaging everyone without judgment for love of God and country."

"We are engaging every sector of society who has a sincere desire to help the country. Engaging them without judgment, doing away with our natural practice to judge. We have to stop judging people and promote a caring culture. We have to do away with personal interests and work for the collective good," Meloto said.

On July 30, Padilla formed his faction, dubbed the Easter Group or sometimes the "Easter or Playboy Bunnies." Apart from lashing out at the change of direction of GK "from spiritual to social," Padilla and his group challenged the manner of choosing leaders in the CfC.

"If not for the love of God, the GK will not be doing this," Meloto said. "There are groups who believe that there are other priorities and this work may not be their priority," he said. "I do not want to speak about him, about what happened. Frank is a great friend. He has just now taken his own direction."

In 2006, the Ramon Magsaysay Foundation cited GK for "harnessing the faith and generosity of Filipinos the world over to confront poverty in their homeland and to provide every Filipino the dignity of a decent home and neighborhood."

Meloto was recognized for "inspiring Filipinos to believe with pride that theirs can be a nation without slums."

Meloto's encounter with CfC led him to leave a successful business career and devote his life full time to its work in 1985.

In 1995, he launched a work-with-the-poor ministry in Bagong Silang, a huge squatter relocation site in the Philippine capital and called it Gawad Kalinga -- "to give care."

Drawing support and volunteers from CfC, Meloto decided to build houses and transformed the neediest area of Bagong Silang into a viable neighborhood with safe, sturdy and attractive homes -- the first GK village.

As Bagong Silang blossomed, Meloto identified new sites for GK villages.

Today, there are over 1,400 such villages across the country.

Meloto guided the organization to embrace all comers -- something he underscored in the interview with the Philippine Daily Inquirer on Saturday.

"We provide the framework," he has said. "We also provide the principles; we also provide the spirit. But anyone can come in."  
***With a report from Jerome Aning***

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