



## **STOP THE SENSELESS KILLINGS OF CHURCH PEOPLE, JUSTICE TO THE VICTIMS OF EXTRA-JUDICIAL KILLINGS**

"With all boldness, as always so now also, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain". (Philippians 1. 20-21)

We, bishops, priests and faithful of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, are once again pained as two of our lay leaders became victims of the spate of senseless killings in the country. Our hearts bleed as we remember in prayers our brothers Benjamin Bayles and Jovelito Agustin, who were both killed for standing firmly for the cause of justice and peace in our land. Benjamin Bayles was a lay minister in the Parish of San Ramon Nonato, and as a committed church worker, he was a District Chairman of the Aglipayan Forum, the Church's advocacy group, in the Diocese of Negros Occidental. He was an active member of the human rights organization September 21 Movement, and the peasant organization National Federation of Sugar Workers, and also a member of Bayan Muna Partylist. His involvement with the marginalized sector and peasants and workers organizations has earned him the ire of the military who tagged him as a member of the New People's Army.

On June 14, while waiting for a ride in Himamaylan City, Bayles was attacked by two men wearing helmets on board a black motorcycle. He was shot several times, and when he fell to the ground, the gunmen continue to shoot at him to ensure that he was dead. He was brought to the hospital by was pronounced dead-on-arrival. He had received numerous threats to his life prior to his killing.

Jovelito Agustin was a lay minister in the Parish of Saint Andrew the Apostle, and the Diocesan President of the Laymen of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (LIFI) in the Diocese of Laoag. He was a broadcaster by profession and worked as an anchorman of a local radio program. He was a pro-labor commentator and widely used his radio program to help victims of illegal recruitment in the province.

Agustin was on his way home onboard his motorcycle after an evening broadcast on June 15 when two motorcycle-riding gunmen overtook him along the highway and shot him several times. He died in the hospital where he was rushed to after the shooting. Unidentified gunmen also fired shots at his residence a month ago, and had received death threats prior to his killing.

Our brothers Benjamin and Jovelito both worked for the cause of truth, justice and peace, and for the defence of the rights of the marginalized. They were both killed and now their names are counted in the endless list of victims of extra-judicial killings mainly attributed to state security forces.

They are the latest victim of a systematic attempt to silence the Iglesia Filipina Independiente that is perceived to be an 'enemy of the state' and listed in the 'echelon of alliances' with the communist movement in the country. Their death clearly points to a re-intensification of political killings and worsening political repression and human rights violations in the Philippines.

We call on the civil society and the international community to bring the issue of political repression and extra-judicial killings, and human rights violations in the country to human rights bodies, most especially to the United Nations Human Rights Commission.

We call on human rights defenders in the country, including the Churches, to remain vigilant against this onslaught aimed towards those who work for the cause of justice and peace, for the promotion of civil rights and democratic reforms in the government.

We call on the incoming President to take decisive steps to put a stop on the killings and culture of impunity in the country, and to give justice to all victims of human rights violations. We also ask him to support the people's call to hold the government of Ms. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo accountable to the numerous cases of political repression and killings in the Philippines under the military's counter-insurgency policy, Oplan Bantay Laya.

We further challenge the incoming President to hold true in its promise to uphold the people's democratic rights and to make the Philippine government abide to its commitment to international human rights instruments.

The Iglesia Filipina Independiente has made another precious offering with the death of our brothers Benjamin Bayles and Jovelito Agustin. In spite of this, even when our priests and prophets are persecuted and put to death, the Iglesia Filipina Independiente will never waver in faith and will persist in proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom.

Our brothers, Benjamin Bayles and Jovelito Agustin, now share the same fate of Father Narciso Pico, Father William Tadena, and Bishop Alberto Ramento, who were brutally murdered for serving the least of our people. In their memory, we continue to steadfastly commit ourselves to the struggle of God's people for justice and peace.

Pro Deo et Patria,

**† THE MOST REVD GODOFREDO J. DAVID, D.D.**

Obispo Maximo

Iglesia Filipina Independiente

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