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And so the détente session continues between Erap and the bishops.

Erap says that as a former Atenean, he having spent eight years at the Ateneo de Manila, he is still a good Catholic. At this point, a bishop whispers to another monsignor, "Yeah, one year in Grade One and seven years in Grade Two at the Ateneo Elementary School."

In fact Erap says that at his recent sojourn to the United States, he proved that he belonged to the Roman Catholic Church. He said that when he cashed a check at a bank in California, the teller asked him if he preferred any denomination. Erap said that he answered with pride, "Of course, I am a Roman Catholic."

While the bishops are having a good laugh, Jaime Cardinal Sin suggests that Erap and the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) agree on a cooperative plan. Erap says that he has always liked masses to be celebrated at the presidential palace on a daily basis. But Erap says, "In the spirit of Christian reconciliation, I always preferred an economical service."

To which a bishop comments, "I presume that you don't light many candles to save money."

Erap then bewails the fact that he has never been invited to a funeral of any Roman Catholic Church dignitary. He says, "The next time a CBCP member dies, God forbids, please invite me to the chronological service so that I can deliver a eulogy."

As the session started late, the meal turned out to be brunch. The hotel served Filipino dishes and Japanese food. While the participants lined up at the buffet table, the bishops noticed that Erap put on his plate food items only from the sushi bar. This prompted a bishop to ask Erap, "Is sushi your favorite?"

Erap looked at the bishop's eyes and said, "In all sincerity and candor, I must say that my favorite is Loi. This is why she is the First Lady."

The bishop did not know whether to laugh or to cry. Then another bishop said, "Mr. President, you did not partake of the lechon." Erap replied, "The fat in the roasted pig is bad for the health, as it will clog up the artillery." And this spurred Sen. Tito Sotto, who was with Erap's party, to comment: "The president is right. If you put the fat of the lechon in the gun barrel, it won't fire."

The bishops just shake their heads at Erap and Tito and they proceeded to eat. After they have

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Written by Bobby Reyes

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eaten, Erap pulled out a cigarette case and asked that he be permitted to smoke. One of the bishops asked if Erap knew that second-hand smoke kills people.

Erap said: "Of course if I light up another cigarette in my left hand while I am smoking already a cigarette in my right hand, the second-hand smoke will really kill me." Then he said that contrary to reports, he reads the Bible and in fact used the Bible in settling a dispute among his air-force generals about who was really the first aviator in the world.

Cardinal Sin asked who the first pilot was.

Erap replied that it was Pontius Pilot.

After smoking, Erap said that it would be best if the CBCP and his office issue a joint statement. He said that Senator Sotto suggested that the statement use a biblical term in describing their common stand on the constitution. And the bishops asked what the biblical term was. Erap said that he agreed with Senator Sotto's idea, which was to issue a joint communiqué with this opening statement: "The Office of the President and the CBCP do not want to circumcise the law of the land."

At this point Cardinal Sin wondered if the president would issue next an executive order requiring priests and bishops to undergo vasectomy? ###

(As excerpted from the forthcoming book, ERAP-SPEAK.)

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