

## THE PHILIPPINE CHURCH AND POLITICS: A CALL FOR CONSISTENCY

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### Abstract

The leadership of the Philippine Church uses a dual approach to political engagement. When speaking on social justice issues in the public sphere, the bishops engage the government using modes of discourse consistent with Catholic social teaching principles. However, when speaking out on national issues related to human sexuality and family life, church leaders use a coercive approach. They insist on imposing Catholic teachings on the general population and engage in partisan politics in violation of Church teaching. The inconsistency of the bishops' dual approach to politics has led to the diminishment of their moral authority and prophetic voice in Philippine society. Unless church leaders adopt a consistent approach to political engagement that recognizes the plurality of faiths in Philippine society and respects the freedom of conscience of all citizens, they will lose their credibility as moral guides in the social and political lives of Filipinos.

**Keywords:** Catholic Social Teaching; Democracy; Human Rights; Partisan Politics; Philippines; Reproductive Health Bill; Sexuality

### Introduction

In his 1988 essay, "Catholic Social and Sexual Teaching: A Methodological Comparison," theologian Charles Curran pointed out two distinctive methodologies the Church uses in its moral teachings.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Curran, "Catholic Social and Sexual teaching: A Methodological Comparison," *Theology Today* (January 1988) 425-440.

The magisterium applies a conservative approach to sexual teachings while using a more liberal approach to social teachings. The Church is more attentive to the “signs of times” and more open to finding proactive responses to social issues. It is less receptive to cultural and social shifts on sexual matters and is more concerned about maintaining traditional teachings on sex and family life.

This essay proposes that the Philippine Church uses an analogous dual approach to political engagement. On matters of social justice and human rights, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) speaks out in the public sphere to denounce the abuse of power, protect the vulnerable, and promote the common good. It cooperates with the country’s democratic institutions to foster good government and challenge unjust structures in society. However, when church teachings on sex and family life are perceived to be threatened, bishops tend to set aside civil discourse in favour of a “the ends justify the means” approach. In these cases, the bishops will resist any change in the status quo and use all their resources and influence to ensure that their position will prevail in society, even to the point of undermining democracy.

This latter form of political engagement by the Church causes confusion and anger among the faithful and has contributed to the gradual loss of the bishops’ moral authority to speak on national issues. Unless the country’s church leaders adopt a consistent political ethic that aims for the common good of all, the Church will continue to undermine its prophetic role in Philippine society.

## 1. Church and State Relations

After the Philippines gained its political independence from the United States in 1946, government leaders sought to form the national identity. The country’s bishops, on their part, promoted a vision of the Philippines as a Catholic nation. In his essay, “People of God, People of the Nation: Official Catholic Discourse on Nation and Nationalism,” Jose Mario Francisco analysed the statements of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) on nationhood and drew out an underlying “imaginary of Catholic nation” in their discourse. The bishops’ statements identified being Filipino with Catholicism and linked patriotism with support for the Church.<sup>2</sup> Francisco cites the following:

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<sup>2</sup>Jose Mario C. Francisco, “People of God, People of the Nation: Official Catholic Discourse on Nation and Nationalism,” *Philippine Studies* 62, 3-4 (2014) 341-375.

For example, its statement of 9 July 1970 carries the declaration, ‘the Philippines is a Christian and a democratic country.’<sup>3</sup> Moreover, this status is seen once more as God-given and now linked to the papacy: ‘When some 400 years ago in the Providence of God the Filipino people began to embrace the Catholic faith, they entered upon a long history of close unity with the Roman Pontiffs.’<sup>4</sup> After obliquely referring to changes brought about by the Philippine Revolution and American occupation as ‘certain critical religious events,’ it asserts that ‘from the very moment of Spain’s occupation ... it became the chief and most earnest endeavor of the Roman Pontiffs... to convert the inhabitants of these islands to the faith . . . (and) Catholic interests progressed in the Philippines under the patronage of the Roman Pontiffs.’<sup>5</sup>

The bishops assert that the country’s adherence to Catholic moral teachings is consistent with being a democratic nation. The bishops acknowledge religious and cultural diversity in Philippine society. However, their moral appeals to conscience and shared values are still from a Catholic perspective. This is evident in their statements during public debates over proposed laws on reproductive health:

Even as we recognize the right of the government to enact laws, we also reiterate that there must be no separation between God and Man. We appeal to our legislators to state in the Bill in clear categorical terms that human life from the moment of conception is sacred. We appeal to our legislators to insure that the Bill recognize, preserve and safeguard freedom of conscience and religion. The Bill must inspire parents not only to be responsible but to be heroic in their God-given and State-recognized duty of parenting. Without these conditions, the Bill if enacted into law will separate our nation from Almighty God.<sup>6</sup>

As Filipinos we are at a moral crossroads. Before us is the powerful, insidious and almost irresistible drive of a post-modern secularist and materialistic spirit. It is a spirit that considers moral and religious norms as regressive... At the heart of the Reproductive Health bill or Responsible Parenthood bill is this secularist and materialistic spirit. The bill ignores moral and religious considerations in the name of democracy and freedom of choice in a pluralist society. But such a spirit goes against the cherished and commonly shared cultural, religious and moral values

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<sup>3</sup>Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), *Statement on Civic Responsibility*, 9 July 1970 in Pedro Quitorio, comp. and ed., *Pastoral Letters, 1945-1995*, Manila: Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, 1996, 330.

<sup>4</sup>CBCP, *Joint Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Hierarchy of the Philippines on the Visit of the Holy Father*, 22 September 1970 in Francisco, “People of God, People of the Nation,” 333.

<sup>5</sup>Francisco, “People of God, People of the Nation,” 356.

<sup>6</sup>Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), *Standing Up for the Gospel of Life*, 2008, <http://cbcponline.net/standing-up-for-the-gospel-of-life/>, accessed 20 September 2020.

that are the bedrock and soul of our democratic and pluralist society... We appeal to you, our Filipino brothers and sisters, to defend our commonly shared moral values and reject the Reproductive Health bill.<sup>7</sup>

Within the context of this idealized vision of the Philippines as a Catholic nation, the bishops applied their dual approaches to political engagement. The two approaches can be described as the standard approach and the extraordinary approach.

## 2. The Church's Standard Approach to Political Engagement

The Church leadership in the Philippines typically publishes pastoral statements to respond to social issues. The statements are generally structured according to the see-judge-act format in Catholic social teaching.<sup>8</sup> Examples of this standard approach are the CBCP statements on indigenous people,<sup>9</sup> comprehensive land reform,<sup>10</sup> and drug-related extra-judicial killings.<sup>11</sup>

Some of the bishops' statements on social issues have been historically significant. One example is the CBCP Post-Election Statement after the 1986 Snap Election. The bishops declared as illegitimate the victory claimed by President Ferdinand Marcos over his opponent Corazon Aquino due to numerous incidents of vote-buying, harassment, and tampered voters' records. The CBCP urged the Filipino people to engage in "active resistance of evil by peaceful means—in the manner of Christ."<sup>12</sup> Shortly after this statement's publication, the non-violent People Power Revolution happened on 22 February 1986, ending the Marcos dictatorship. Another example of a historically important episcopal statement is "What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?" published in 1988.<sup>13</sup> This was the first

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<sup>7</sup> CBCP, *Proclaim Life... In Season and Out of Season*, 22 July 2011, <http://cbcponline.net/proclaim-life-in-season-and-out-of-season/>, accessed on 20 September 2020.

<sup>8</sup>John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 1961, #236.

<sup>9</sup>CBCP, *Your Brother's Blood Cries out to Me from the Ground! (Gen 4:10): On the Killing of Voiceless and Defenseless Lumads*, <http://cbcponline.net/your-brothers-blood-cries-out-to-me-from-the-ground-gen410/>, accessed on 20 September 2020.

<sup>10</sup> CBCP, *Moral Ethical Dimensions of Comprehensive Agrarian Reform*, <http://cbcponline.net/moral-ethical-dimensions-of-the-comprehensive-agrarian-reform/>, accessed on 20 September 2020.

<sup>11</sup>CBCP, *For I find no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies – oracle of the Lord God (Ezekiel 18:32)*, 30 January 2017, accessed on 20 September 2020, <http://cbcponline.net/for-i-find-no-pleasure-in-the-death-of-anyone-who-dies-oracle-of-the-lord-god-ezekiel-1832/>

<sup>12</sup>CBCP, *Post-Election Statement*, 13 February 1986, accessed on 21 September 2020, <http://cbcponline.net/post-election-statement/>

<sup>13</sup>CBCP, *What Is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?*, 29 January 1988, accessed 21 September 2020, <http://cbcponline.net/what-is-happening-to-our-beautiful-land/>

pastoral letter of any bishops' conference to address environmental issues extensively. Its text was quoted by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si*.

In its statements on social justice, the bishops promoted the idea of the Philippines as a Catholic nation. In its 1986 Post-Election Statement, the CBCP praised the bravery of many citizens who took a stand against electoral violence and cheating. The bishops asked rhetorically, "Are there other men and women of conscience who will stand up like them and courageously confess their Christianity?"<sup>14</sup> Such a Catholic-centric perspective becomes problematic when the Church uses its extraordinary approach to coerce the government to impose Catholic norms on the general population.

### 3. The Church's Extraordinary Approach to Political Engagement

When the Church perceives a challenge to its moral teaching on family life, sexuality, and reproduction, it uses public discourse and political activity that assert a theocratic view of Philippine society. Some church leaders have improperly participated in partisan campaigning in elections. For example, the former archbishop of Manila, Jaime Cardinal Sin, opposed the candidacy of Vice-President Fidel V. Ramos for the presidency in the 1992 elections. Even though Ramos was a crucial player in the People Power Revolution of 1986, Cardinal Sin did not see him as an acceptable choice for president because he was a Protestant. Sin publicly expressed his preference for two other candidates and reportedly asked the current president, Corazon Aquino, not to endorse Ramos.<sup>15</sup> One reason for Sin's objection was his fear that Ramos would introduce a population control program contrary to Catholic teaching. As a Protestant, Ramos was not bound to follow church teachings on contraception and sterilization. In a pre-election homily, Sin appealed to voters to "elect a president and vice-president who... will put to an end the active promotion of mechanical means and artificial devices of birth control."<sup>16</sup> Despite Sin's partisan pronouncements, Ramos won the elections.

The Church waged a similar partisan campaign against Dr Juan Flavio Velasco during the 1995 senatorial elections. Velasco was the Health Secretary of President Ramos. He received much opposition and vilification from church leaders because he promoted contraceptives

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<sup>14</sup>CBCP, *Post-Election Statement*, 1986.

<sup>15</sup>Robert L. Youngblood, "President Ramos, the Church, and Population Policy in the Philippines," *Asian Affairs* 25, 1 (1998) 3-4.

<sup>16</sup>Youngblood, "President Ramos," 11.

in government health centres, and he distributed condoms to prevent the spread of HIV. Despite many personal attacks against him and his candidacy by bishops, Flavio won the election and was re-elected in 2001.<sup>17</sup>

Some of the most egregious examples of Church partisan campaigning happened during the 2013 midterm elections. In 2012, the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act was signed into law after a very contentious battle between the Church and the government. The bishops opposed the law because it provides the general population with greater access to family planning devices, medicines, and services. After the law was passed, some church leaders campaigned for or against senatorial candidates in the 2013 elections, depending on whether they supported or opposed the reproductive health law. Archbishop Ramon Arguelles of the Archdiocese of Lipa campaigned for the candidates of the *Ang Kapatiran* Party. The bishop claimed that “they are the only ones who are committed to promote what is good, true and Godly.”<sup>18</sup> The Diocese of Bacolod hung posters outside its cathedral with a list of endorsed candidates as Team Buhay (Team Life) and a list of candidates to be rejected as Team Patay (Team Death). Eventually, Fifty-two parishes in different dioceses and archdioceses followed the example of the Bacolod cathedral.<sup>19</sup>

In conjunction with partisan campaigning, individual bishops also use political threats to intimidate legislators and politicians. One such threat is the mobilization of a Catholic vote. For example, during the 2010 national elections, “an official of the Episcopal Commission on Family and Life (ECFL) of the CBCP warned that ‘as the 2010 elections are getting nearer, politicians should not afford to disregard the Catholic Church’s stand on the pro-life issues. Otherwise, the Catholic Church knows how to mobilize its members not to vote for anti-life politicians.’”<sup>20</sup> In a similar vein, during the 2013 elections, a few bishops endorsed the Catholic Vote Movement organized by

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<sup>17</sup>Raymund Jose G. Quilop, “Religion and Politics in the Philippines,” in *The Politics of Religion in South and Southeast Asia*, Ishtiaq Ahmed, ed., Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011, 163.

<sup>18</sup>Aloysius Lopez Cartagenas, *Becoming a Leaven of Society*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2014, 56.

<sup>19</sup>Eleanor R. Dionisio, “Catholic Partisanship in the 2013 Elections: ‘Churchifying’ Democracy or Democratizing the Church?,” *Philippine Sociological Review* 62 (2014) 11-40.

<sup>20</sup>Eric Marcello O. Genilo, “Crossing the Line: Church Use of Political Threats Against Pro-RH Bill Legislators,” in *Hapag* 7, 1 (2010) 63-77.

some Catholic laity.<sup>21</sup> In both instances, voters ignored the bishops' appeals. Many candidates who were threatened or denounced by bishops won in the elections.

One threat that was spoken about but was never implemented was the denial of communion to politicians. In 2010, during the heated debates on the proposed reproductive health law, "the president of the bishops' conference was asked hypothetically if the current President Benigno Aquino could be excommunicated if he supported the distribution of contraceptives. The bishop said it was a not a proximate possibility, but they (the CBCP) would look into the matter."<sup>22</sup> Although the CBCP communicated no actual threat of excommunication, the mere mention of such a possibility elicited intense criticism from the public. The bishops had to make a statement denying any intention of excommunicating the president.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4. A Call for Consistency

The extraordinary approach of the Philippine bishops to political engagements reveals two serious inconsistencies that must be corrected. The first is an inconsistency with official church teaching on political participation. The second is an inconsistency in the treatment of social issues that affect the lives of Filipinos.

##### 4.1. Inconsistency with Church Teaching

According to Catholic social teaching, the clergy have an indirect role in politics. They are to form the faithful's consciences who have a more direct role of engaging in partisan politics and governance.

The Church's Magisterium does not wish to exercise political power or eliminate the freedom of opinion of Catholics regarding contingent questions. Instead, it intends—as is its proper function—to instruct and illuminate the consciences of the faithful, particularly those involved in political life, so that their actions may always serve the integral promotion of the human person and the common good.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Eric Marcelo O. Genilo, "Epilogue: The Church of PCP II After the RH Bill Debate," in *The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines: Quo Vadis?* Agnes Brazal et al., ed., Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015, 177.

<sup>22</sup>Eric Marcelo O. Genilo, "Church Power and the Reproductive Health Debate in the Philippines," in *Doing Asian Theological Ethics in a Cross-Cultural and Interreligious Context*, Yiu Sing Lucas Chan, James F. Keenan, and Shaji George Kochuthara, ed., Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 1044-1055.

<sup>23</sup>GMA News Online, "CBCP Chief: No Threat of Excommunication vs Aquino," <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/202368/cbcp-chief-no-threat-of-excommunication-vs-aquino/story/>, accessed 1 October 2020.

<sup>24</sup>Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, 24 November 2002, #571.

We have seen that the formation of just structures is not directly the duty of the Church, but belongs to the world of politics, the sphere of the autonomous use of reason. The Church has an indirect duty here, in that she is called to contribute to the purification of reason and to the reawakening of those moral forces without which just structures are neither established nor prove effective in the long run. The direct duty to work for a just ordering of society, on the other hand, is proper to the lay faithful.<sup>25</sup>

The CBCP oversteps its role in Philippine society when it seeks to impose its own Catholic solutions to national issues and disregards the government's primary responsibility to pursue the common good of all Filipinos regardless of religion. Catholic social teaching opposes such abuse of church power.

(Catholic social teaching) has no intention of giving the Church power over the State. Even less is it an attempt to impose on those who do not share the faith ways of thinking and modes of conduct proper to faith. Its aim is simply to help purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgment and attainment of what is just."<sup>26</sup>

In practice, the CBCP, as a body, avoids partisan campaigning during elections, but it tolerates individual bishops' endorsement and denunciation of candidates. There are no sanctions or admonitions for bishops who urge citizens to vote for or against a particular candidate. Such partisan political activity contradicts past statements of the CBCP on political participation.

The Bishops in the CBCP... still maintain the freedom of Catholic members to choose their candidates. We expect them to discern, discuss, and personally decide whom to vote. To dictate on them whom to vote is as bad as buying their votes... The CBCP does not want the candidates to be indebted to the bishops; instead we want the candidates to make a genuine covenant with the electorate: that if elected they will serve the people and not themselves.<sup>27</sup>

It is precisely because of the possibility of plural options in politics that Church people who hold positions of leadership in the Church do not ordinarily engage in what is called "partisan politics." Church leaders represent the entire community which they head or lead and for them to publicly and officially, as it were, push for one option over others when these are equally compatible with the Gospel and hence moral would be tantamount to claiming theirs is the only option in the Gospel to take and the people should follow their lead. This would be disastrous for the unity of the community.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 25 December 2005, #29.

<sup>26</sup>Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, #28.

<sup>27</sup>CBCP, *Freedom to Choose Candidates*, 13 March 2007.

<sup>28</sup>CBCP, *Pastoral Exhortation on Philippine Politics*, 16 September 1998.

Another inconsistency with church teaching is the assertion of the existence of a Catholic vote. This was evident during the 2010 and 2013 elections when bishops threatened legislators with a Catholic vote if they supported the proposed reproductive health law. Such threats contradict past assertions of the CBCP that there is no Catholic vote in the Philippines.

There is generally no such thing as a ‘Catholic vote’ or ‘the Bishops’ candidates.’ This is simply a myth. The Bishops do not endorse any particular candidate or party but leave to the laity to vote according to their enlightened and formed consciences in accordance with the Gospel.<sup>29</sup>

...there is no Catholic vote in the Philippines because all Catholics are free to vote any candidate of any political party. On the other hand, because Catholics are almost everywhere, many of the candidates who win, win by catholic votes; but this is no reason to brag about, because the candidates win or lose by his own virtue or lack of it, and the electors vote according to their respective persuasion and conviction.<sup>30</sup>

The attempts of bishops to impose their vision of a Catholic nation during public debates contradict the decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines. The Council, held in 1991, was convened to renew the local church in the spirit of Vatican II and promote its transformation into a “Church of the Poor.” The Council’s decrees on political involvement have been violated by the bishops’ coercive use of political threats.

The public defense of gospel values, however, especially when carried into the arena of public policy formulation, whether through the advocacy of lay leaders or the moral suasion by pastors, is not without limit. It needs emphasizing, that, although pastors have the liberty to participate in policy debate and formulation, that liberty must not be exercised to the detriment of the religious freedom of non-communicants, or even of dissenting communicants. This is a clear implication of Vatican II’s *Dignitatis Humanae*. This is not just a matter of prudence; it is a matter of justice.<sup>31</sup>

There may even be some Catholic believers who in all honesty do not see the truth the way the Church’s magisterium discerns, interprets, and teaches it. In such a situation, the Church must clearly and firmly teach what it believes is the truth and require its members to form their consciences accordingly. Yet the church must also, with all charity and justice, hold on to its doctrine on religious freedom—that the human person is bound to follow his or her conscience faithfully, and must not be forced to act contrary to it.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>CBCP, *Pastoral Exhortation on Philippine Politics*.

<sup>30</sup>CBCP, *Freedom to Choose Candidates*.

<sup>31</sup>Second Plenary Council of the Philippines [PCPII], *Acts and Decrees*, #358.

<sup>32</sup>PCPII, *Acts and Decrees*, # 362-363.

The abusive use of the Church's influence in Philippines society also violates what Catholic social teaching says about the Church's role in pluralistic societies. Leaders of a dominant religious tradition must not violate the freedom of conscience of those who do not share the same tradition. The bishops' insistence that national laws should be consistent with Catholic teaching on reproduction disregards other faith traditions' moral positions. Religious groups such as the National Council of Churches in the Philippines, the *Iglesia ni Cristo*, and the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches expressed their support for the reproductive health law that the Catholic Church opposed.<sup>33</sup> *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* warns against the abuse of power of a dominant religion to the detriment of minority religions' interests. "Because of its historical and cultural ties to a nation, a religious community might be given special recognition on the part of the State. Such recognition must in no way create discrimination within the civil or social order for other religious groups."<sup>34</sup>

#### 4.2. Inconsistency in the Treatment of Social Issues

The Philippine Church rightly interprets issues such as capital punishment, land reform, corruption, and human trafficking as grave social issues that need to be addressed through the lens of catholic social teaching. However, for social problems related to sexual activity and procreation, like the spread of HIV among the youth, low-income families with too many children to support, and high rates of teenage pregnancies, the Church applies its sexual teachings at the individual or the family level. It minimizes the social implications of these issues and dismisses systemic solutions proposed by the government. For example, during the reproductive law debates, the government proposed sex education in public schools to address HIV prevalence and early pregnancies among young people. The bishops opposed this proposal and insisted that sex education should be provided primarily by parents at home.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Esperanza Cabral, "Reproductive Health Law in the Philippines," *Journal of the ASEAN Federation of Endocrine Societies* 28, 1 (May 2013), <https://asean-endocrinejournal.org/index.php/JAFES/article/view/48/471>, accessed on 1 October 2020.

<sup>34</sup>Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2 April 2004, #169.

<sup>35</sup>CBCP, "Securing our Moral Heritage: Towards a Moral Society," 24 July 2020, <http://cbcponline.net/securing-our-moral-heritage-towards-a-moral-society/>, accessed mon 6 October 2020.

The Philippine Church needs to treat dehumanizing sexual and family life situations as social justice issues. It must consistently address all systemic and structural problems that affect Filipinos as social issues, whether related to sex or not. The bishops' insistence on having two political approaches, one for social issues and another for sexual issues, contradicts the magisterium's call of integral human development. If the universal Church calls for the full human development of the whole person and every person, then the local Church must not treat matters involving sexuality and family life differently from other issues affecting the development and integrity of the human person in society.

If the CBCP maintains two approaches to political engagements, the Philippine Church becomes vulnerable to accusations of arbitrariness, hypocrisy, and inconsistency. It is difficult to reconcile the bishops' defence of human rights and democracy against the Marcos dictatorship's abuse of power and their improper use of power in imposing catholic sexual teaching on a pluralistic society.

## 5. The Loss of a Prophetic Voice

Filipino voters have not been receptive to the partisan campaigns of bishops. Most of the time, candidates rejected by the hierarchy (e.g., Ramos, Flavio, and pro-reproductive health legislators) have been elected, and those endorsed by bishops do not always win. After the failure of the Church's efforts to block the passage of the reproductive health law in 2012 and the absence of a real Catholic vote in recent elections, politicians and lawmakers are more confident to propose legislation that challenges church teaching.

There has also been a radical change in the relationship between the Office of the President and the Church. In previous administrations, the president has always been respectful and non-confrontational in responding to criticism from the Church. The current president, Rodrigo Duterte, openly curses and even threatens the bishops. In one tirade, Duterte said, "These bishops that you guys have, kill them. They are useless fools. All they do is criticize."<sup>36</sup> The President accused the Church of hypocrisy for the clergy abuse scandals, being a victim of abuse by a priest. "Catholic Church leaders should not hold themselves morally superior because their 'hypocritical institution' has a long history of

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<sup>36</sup> Ted Regencia, "Philippines' Duterte: 'Kill those useless bishops,'" [https://www.aljazeera.com/news/\\_\\_\\_\\_2018/12/05/philippines-duterte-kill-those-useless-bishops/](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/____2018/12/05/philippines-duterte-kill-those-useless-bishops/), accessed on 2 October 2020.

wrongdoing.”<sup>37</sup> He also took offense against the negative campaign of the CBCP against his candidacy for the presidency. “They campaigned against me, everybody was saying ‘Do not vote for Duterte.’ Fine. I said, let this election be a referendum between me and the Catholic Church.”<sup>38</sup> Even though President Duterte has spoken harshly against church leaders, he continues to have a high popularity rating among Filipinos, including Catholics. Duterte’s accusation of hypocrisy against the bishops resonates with many Filipinos’ sentiments regarding the church hierarchy.

The bishops’ loss of moral authority to guide voters during elections is evident in the 2019 midterm elections. Two bishops made different appeals to Catholic voters. Archbishop Socrates Villegas released a video that begins with the line “I believe...therefore I reject!” and juxtaposed Duterte’s curses with bible passages. The bishop urged Catholics to vote against candidates who support the president: “My dear brothers and sisters, are you going to betray God, are you going to deny your faith, by your vote?”<sup>39</sup> Bishop Broderick Pabillo called on Catholics to “elect public officials who are principled, courageous, and who have the common good as their main concern.”<sup>40</sup> Pabillo wanted to encourage Filipinos to elect enough qualified opposition candidates in the Senate to create a legislature independent of the President. Unfortunately, neither appeal was heeded by Filipino voters. A majority of senatorial candidates elected were allies of the President.

## **Conclusion**

The Philippine hierarchy must accept the reality that their moral authority to influence Filipino voters has significantly been compromised by their abuse of political power and the perception of institutional hypocrisy. As the Philippine Church prepares to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Christianity’s arrival in the Philippines in 2021, it will be wise for the CBCP not to focus on the

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<sup>37</sup> Jamaine Punzalan, “Duterte Calls Catholic Church “most hypocritical institution,” <https://news.abs-cbn.com/nation/05/22/16/duterte-calls-catholic-church-most-hypocritical-institution>, accessed on 2 October 2020.

<sup>38</sup> ABS-CBN News, “Duterte calls Catholic Church ‘most hypocritical institution,’” 29 September 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Paterno R. Esmaguil II, “Duterte vs the Church: Do the Times Call for a Catholic Vote?” <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/duterte-vs-church-do-times-call-catholic-vote>, accessed on 2 October 2020.

<sup>40</sup> SunStar Manila, “CBCP Official Pushes for ‘Catholic Vote,’” <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/article/1794795/Manila/Local-News/CBCP-official-pushes-for-Catholic-vote>, accessed on 2 October 2020.

Church's triumphs and achievements. Instead, the bishops should emulate the example of John Paul II during the Jubilee Year in 2000, when he apologized for the Church's sins. As a first step to regaining the trust of those who have been discouraged by the arrogance of the Church in the political sphere, the bishops should name their public offenses, apologize for them with sincerity, and make amends with effective actions.

The CBCP must set aside its unrealistic vision of a Catholic nation and treat Filipinos as persons with the right to exercise their freedom of conscience. Most importantly, the bishops need to practice what they preach. The Philippine bishops need to heed the voices of their fellow bishops in the document *Justice in the World*: "While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes."<sup>41</sup> Only through repentance, humility, and institutional conversion can the Philippines' bishops recover the prophetic voice they have lost.

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<sup>41</sup>Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*, 1971, #40.