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Church and State in the Philippines: Tackling Life Issues in a “Culture of Death”

Julius BAUTISTA

This paper reflects upon the “life issues” of population growth and reproductive health in the Philippines in the context of the ongoing congressional deliberation of House Bill 5043. Specific attention is paid to the influence of the Roman Catholic Church upon this process, through an analysis of the institutional pronouncements and edicts made by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP). It still remains to be seen whether HB5043 will be passed into law. What can be observed even at this stage, however, is that there may well be a discordance between Church proclamations regarding faith-based sexual morality on the one hand, and popular opinion and actual practices under difficult economic and social circumstances on the other. In this respect, sustainable population control in the Philippines continues to be an uphill battle, given the Church’s persistent association of artificial contraception with a pernicious “culture of death”.

Keywords: abortion, Church, contraception, corruption, population growth, religion, reproductive health

Above all, society must learn to embrace once more the great gift of life, to cherish it, to protect it, and to defend it against the culture of death, itself an expression of the great fear that stalks our times... A society with a diminished sense of the value of human life at its earliest stages has already opened the door to a culture of death. — Pope John Paul II, October 1998.

In 1998, then Pope John Paul II addressed visiting American Bishops in Rome. As the Catholic Church approached its Jubilee year in 2000, the former Pontiff reiterated that the most important task of Bishops was to be proactive in fighting a pernicious “culture of death”

— an indictment on those who sought to normalize abortion and artificial forms of birth control. Half a world away, that message was heard loud and clear. A decade since the former Pontiff's address, the "great fear" of a "culture of death" still resonates strongly within the Roman Catholic hierarchy in the Philippines. The Filipino clergy's stance on issues such as contraception and birth control has brought them in direct contestation with legislators, particularly as the need for a definitive national policy on the demographic and sexual well-being of the Filipino people is deliberated upon in the Philippine Congress. On which issues do the agendas of the Church and the state intersect in the Philippines? And to what extent does the Philippine Church remain beholden to the traditional teachings of the Vatican?

In this essay I shall reflect upon these questions by examining the issue of population growth and reproductive health (henceforth PGRH). For it is by analyzing the "culture of death" as it is manifested in official Church discourse that we can effectively gauge the extent to which the Catholic Church exerts pressure upon the legislative process of governance in the Philippines. Typically, the interaction between Church and state in the Philippines is analyzed according to the former's role in extra-constitutional interventions, most notably in the removal of Presidents Ferdinand Marcos and Joseph Estrada. The issue of PGRH is a platform from which we can analyze the impact of religion *within* the constitutional process of governance, and as such offers potential for a more nuanced understanding of Church-state interaction.

As an ecclesiastical institution, the Church in the Philippines projects a united position on issues affecting the political, social, and cultural vicissitudes of Filipinos through the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP). In addition to church sermons, these positions are expressed in the form of periodically released pastoral letters and "Bishop Blogs" hosted on the official CBCP website. More than just united statements of an official stance, pastoral letters become the basis of sacramental life itself, often being disseminated and discussed during Mass. The analytical strategy I

employ in this essay is to consider the Church’s proclamations on matters of demography and sexual morality as they are expressed through such official channels. What insights about the Church’s relationship with the state in the Philippines can we glean from the discourse of official pronouncements and statements?

It must be pointed out from the outset that the Philippine Church is not a monolithic entity, and it is prudent to assume that there are rifts within the hierarchy. The perspective that laments the “culture of death” is only one among a multitude of voices in the debate; albeit a prominent one. The official Philippine Church position on PGRH, on the whole, is widely interpreted as a logical, uncompromising extension of traditional Roman Catholic teachings on the family. Grounding the discussion of Church-state relations on the issue of PGRH at the very least encourages us to distinguish between conservative, moderate, and progressive positions within the Church. I argue that the official Church, for various political agendas, maintains a consistent foregrounding on traditional Church teachings. This foregrounding is, firstly, consistent with the historical role the Philippine Catholic Church has played in society and, as such, enables the Church to pursue its mandate as a political vanguard. That is, a conservative position on PGRH allows the Church to take a critical stance as regulator of public and political affairs of the nation. In beginning this discussion it is important to acknowledge that the Church’s investment in issues of state is premised upon more recent political and historical circumstances. It is to these that we shall now turn.

From “Critical Collaboration” to “People Power”

When one thinks of “the Church” in the Philippines, one of the more immediate images that is conjured up is that of the CBCP.¹ Since its inception in the 1940s, the CBCP has been effective in establishing a fundamental connection between “Filipino values” and “Catholic values” such that the CBCP itself is looked upon as the moral compass by the approximately eighty-five per cent of the

Filipino population who profess the Roman Catholic faith. This mandate is premised upon the explicit declaration, reiterated in the 1991 Second Plenary Council of the Roman Catholic Church of the Philippines (PCP-II), that while Church and state are autonomous and independent from each other, the former should continue to judiciously analyze the government's actions without subverting its power. Yet the track record of the Church before and after that declaration has not been so straightforward. The years since its inception has seen the very real and significant involvement of the CBCP in matters of the state, even to the point of instigating the latter's overthrow.

While the Spanish and American colonial periods were important in the formative years of Catholicism in the Philippines, the role of the Church as a politically influential element in Philippine democracy has its roots in the authoritarian and post-authoritarian regimes from the 1970s onwards. The declaration of Martial Law by Ferdinand Marcos in 1972 heralded a period which saw the suppression of social and civic groups in the name of fighting communism. It was under such circumstances, observes Barry (2006), that the prominence of the conservative reform elements of the Church — factions that adhered strictly to traditional Catholic doctrine — was nurtured. That is, the Church was allowed by the regime to fill the vacuum created by the suppression of several sectors of civil society. The Church took up this role by taking on not merely pastoral responsibilities, but by being proactive in lifting the living circumstances of Filipino Catholics. In this era, the Church adopted a policy of “critical collaboration” with the regime, in which Church leaders such as Jaime Cardinal Sin gave tacit approval to the Marcos dictatorship, even while he remained critical of and vocal about certain abuses against human rights and political persecution.

The Church during this period was also greatly invigorated by the spirit of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) in 1963–65. Vatican II resolved to make the worldwide Church more relevant by involving itself more concretely in matters of modern social life. A particular emphasis in this regard was to direct more of the

Church’s attention towards the poor beyond their doctrinal and spiritual concerns. The Church invested resources towards socio-economic development projects to ameliorate poverty, particularly in the countryside; a focus that was significant because a pro-poor stance meant that clergy worked even more closely with marginalized sectors of the community, including those in rural areas beyond the state’s surveillance. According to Gaspar, this often rendered priests and nuns more amenable to developing a working relationship with the Communist Party of the Philippines, and eventually towards the clergy’s politicization in an era of growing dissatisfaction with the Marcos administration (1997, p. 154). This did not, however, immediately result in a Church bent on overthrowing the state. The policy of critical collaboration had led to what Bolasco (1994) called a closing of the ranks that effectively quelled the leftist inclinations of the politicized clergy. Under these circumstances, a conservative reformist faction within the Church, represented most prominently by Jaime Cardinal Sin, had emerged as the legitimate source of the Church’s position during the authoritarian era.

The effective end of “critical collaboration”, however, came in the Church’s vital role not just in criticizing the regime, but instigating its downfall. In 1986, the Church was instrumental in inciting the revolution that removed President Marcos from office. In this involvement, the conservative reformists had fostered a strong alliance with the candidacy and, eventually, the administration of devoutly Catholic Corazon Aquino. The event of “People Power” saw millions of Filipinos respond to Cardinal Sin’s call to a bloodless revolution, resulting in the restoration of democracy after years of repression and persecution. In 2001, the spirit of People Power was marshalled again when Church leaders galvanized both the masses and the middle class in extra-constitutional interventions into the political process. The Church-backed ouster of President Joseph Estrada — who prominent Church leaders saw as the personification of an endemically corrupt and immoral political culture — was portrayed as an extension of the continuing relevance of the Church as a facilitator of good governance. Indeed the contours of Church-state

relations in the Philippines can be seen in the very idea of a “People Power Church”. For People Power denoted not only the explosion of latent political activism, but the divine legitimacy that compelled its occurrence. The term came to signify the very convergence of the Filipino’s political, moral, and religious responsibility which the Church, through its explicit and provocative involvement, took upon themselves to instigate. The CBCP’s continuing association with People Power, then, is what solidifies its place as one of the most significant players in moral and political debates in the Philippines to this day.

Since 2001, the Church has been invested in ensuring the integrity of political institutions in the country. The People Power mandate of the Church has greatly encouraged the perception that it represents the will of the people, even if that will goes against the agenda of the state itself. It is in this perception of the Church as *for the people* that the debate about “culture of death” is significant. In contrast to the Church’s role in People Power, the intervention of the church on the PGRH debate goes against popular opinion and, as some commentators have suggested, is counterproductive to the well-being of their flock who they had galvanized in the two People Power revolutions. How does the Church position itself in relation to an issue for which they do not have widespread popular support? It is to this perception of a counterproductive Church that this discussion should therefore turn.

The Philippine Conundrum

The long-standing intersection of the agenda between the Church and the state becomes more significant when considered in the context of what has been called “the Philippine Conundrum”. This is exemplified by those such as Hill (2006) and others who have inquired into the social and political reasons why the Philippines has not prospered in spite of democratic freedom and its relatively robust economic performance. The issue of PGRH is often identified by organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme

(UNDP) as a significant factor that nullifies whatever gains are made in terms of revenue generation and fiscal policy. To put it simply, according to the National Statistics Office of the Philippines (NSO), the Philippine population — measured at 88.57 million in 2008 — is growing too fast for its own economic and environmental sustainability (NSO 2008). With an annual population growth rate of 2.04 per cent for the period 2000 to 2007 — one of the highest in Southeast Asia — NSO projections see a population of over 140 million by 2040.²

The situation of reproductive health in the country is equally telling. The NSO estimates that ten women die every day as a result of complications relating to pregnancy and childbirth. The maternal mortality rate is measured at 162 per 100,000 live births. In terms of abortions, there were nearly half a million cases in 2000, translating to a rate of eighteen induced terminations per hundred pregnancies (Juarez, Cabigon, and Singh 2005). Of those who had abortions, seventy-two per cent admitted that they did so because they could not afford the economic cost of having another child, highlighting the strong connection between poverty and PGRH that is at the heart of the issue.

There have been several attempts at addressing these problems at a legislative level. The most recent bill, brought before the Fourteenth Philippine Congress, is "HB5043: Reproductive Health and Population Development" of 2008 (henceforth, HB5043).³ This "integrated" bill couples the imperatives of curbing population growth with improving reproductive health for females. Its primary author, Albay representative Edcel Lagman, contends that the bill was designed to expand the choices of contraception methods in the country, and to reiterate the right of females to control their own fertility. The salient features of the bill are (1) mandatory sexual education for grade schools from grade five up to fourth year high school, including topics on artificial contraceptives and reproductive health; (2) the provision of condoms and other forms of artificial contraception by government health clinics; (3) the availability of voluntary sterilization, ligation, and other health care services for

abused minors and pregnant minors, and penalties for public health officials who refuse to perform them; (4) the provision of non-judgmental and non-discriminatory “post-abortive” health care for women; (5) tax incentives for those who have less than two children; and finally (6) a “heightened national multi-media campaign” on matters concerning contraception, family planning, and reproductive health.

A Culture of Death

The position of the Catholic hierarchy in relation to PGRH, judging by the official pronouncements that are made in the name of the CBCP, has been fairly consistent over the past few decades. In spirit, this position states that legislation should be consistent with traditional Church teachings on sexual morality and family planning. CBCP pastoral letters in the early 1990s — such as “Love is Life: A Pastoral Letter on the Population Control Activities of the Philippine Government and Planned Parenthood Associations” and “Guiding Principles of the CBCP on Population Control” — state an uncompromising and consistent position which opposes artificial contraception, particularly to the extent that any measures in HB5043 that sanction its use would mean “opening the door” to a pernicious culture of immorality. As Pope John Paul II’s exhortation above expresses, the nature of the Church’s involvement in the debate is greatly premised upon a discourse of fear, which will be discussed in this section.

In most cases, the CBCP hierarchy has entered the debate about HB5043, not on the level of figures and statistics, but on ethical and moral considerations. In his 6 October 2007 pastoral letter, CBCP president, Archbishop Lagdameo, associated the use of artificial contraception with a “culture of death” — echoing the phrase initially used by Pope John Paul II in his 1966 pamphlet “Love and Responsibility”. In the 1960s, then as Bishop Karol Wojtyła, John Paul II exposed the full meaning of erotic love within the context of married life, and elaborated upon what it meant to be pious in the

context of the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Wojtyła’s memorandum denounced the use of the contraceptive pill or intrauterine devices as mechanisms which go against a sense of “parity between men and women”. A “culture of death”, in this respect, is a mentality in which artificial contraceptives free males from the burden of sexual responsibility, and in effect leads to an endemic disregard for the procreative value of the sexual act. In this regard, natural family planning (NFP) is the only acceptable form of contraception within the confines of a conjugal union.

Beyond the influence of John Paul II himself, Filipino Bishops have been explicit in linking the debate about HB5043 to Pope Paul VI’s infamous 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae* (Of human life) which was, in turn, influenced by Wojtyła’s memorandum. First established by Pope John XXIII, *Humanae Vitae* was the result of a period of deliberation to tackle the issues of family, population, and birth rate. *Humanae Vitae* is largely remembered in the West as exemplifying a stark divide within the Catholic Church between the majority who favoured a change in the classic Church position against contraception, and a minority who sought to maintain that belief. After two years of deliberation, the “Majority Report” was rejected by Pope Paul VI in favour of the minority view. On 25 July 1968 he published the encyclical, section 14 of which codified the Roman Catholic view against abortion and the use of contraceptives.

Philippine bishops, taking inspiration from traditional Vatican teachings, vehemently denounce what they see as an insidious and dangerous contraceptive mentality by appropriating the “culture of death” and using it to denote divorce, euthanasia, abortion, transexuality and homosexuality through the acronym “DEATH”. In expressing “death” as an acronym, the clergy is able to declare that the campaign against HB5043 is not merely one about sexual health and demography, but a general crusade against a broad spectrum of the moral tribulations of Filipino society. More significantly, DEATH carries with it the sense of fear and peril that John Paul II had warned against, and for which Paul Paul VI in rejecting the “Majority Report”, was seen as prophetic.

The pastoral letter entitled “Our Firm Stand against Contraceptive Mentality”, for example, has associated family planning with placing the nation on the slippery slope to abortion. In content and in spirit, the letter warns against a mentality that opens up the possibility of abortion during moments when contraceptives prove ineffective. “When contraceptives fail”, suggests Archbishop Cruz in an *Asia News* article dated 15 September 2004, “abortion is the recourse”. Indeed, that the bill merely mentions “post abortion complications” is considered a tacit acceptance and even promotion of a mentality of abortion rather than as a punitive measure against the possibility of its occurrence. Father Roy Cimagala, in his Bishop Blog entitled “Sailing” on the CBCP website, expresses such views:

How can we resist legalizing abortion when the fine print of the term “reproductive health” already includes abortion? In many documents of NGOs and even of the UN, the concern over maternal mortality and unsafe abortion is actually a code for legalizing abortion (27 April 2009)

Father Cimagala’s view on abortion is part of a larger, more serious indictment of secular ideology, likening efforts at promoting the HB5043 to a “global effort by some ideologues who want to impose their ideas on the whole world”.

Other influential members of the Church had also thought of contraception not only as morally reprehensible, but scientifically dubious and untenable as well. The late Jaime Cardinal Sin had famously made the claim that condoms contain microscopic pores that are permeable to HIV pathogens, a view that does not cite any particular research. Rather, this is a claim that had been articulated by the Vatican’s former head of the Pontifical Council for the Family, Alfonso Lopez Trujillo. The CBCP’s position, as of 2009, in general has not been as conspiratorial as this, but has nevertheless remained unchanged in its opposition to its passage, as reiterated by Bishop Arturo Bastes, who described the bill as “anti-life anti-family ... a danger to all” (CBCP News, 18 May 2009). What is clear, however, is that a discourse of fear underlies official Church positions on HB5043, and the questions that we ask at this juncture is whether

or not such discourses (1) reflect the circumstances and mentalities of the faithful and (2) whether they represent the entire diversity of opinion within the Church.

Pious Lives in a Culture of Death

As we trace the extent of the Philippine Church’s involvement in the debate over PGRH, we are confronted with the question of how ordinary people themselves are relating to the issue. What we find is that while the issues of PGRH relate to the most intimate affairs of human life, there is often a slippage between the normative positions the Church promotes and the practical realities that pious Filipino Catholics face in their daily lives. That is, the discourse of fear upon which much of the official Church position is based, is not translating to a widespread public opposition to HB5043.

I do not mean to suggest that Filipinos are undergoing a “crisis of faith”, if by that we mean that people are abandoning religion as the ethical and moral standard in their lives. It is not difficult to see that the vast majority of Filipinos remain committed to the Catholic faith on the level of practice and belief. What I would like to discuss, by referring to some anecdotal evidence below, is the notion that when it comes to issues of reproductive health and family planning, religion might not always be the foremost guiding principle in the decision-making process of pious Filipino Catholics. Primary research on the topic indicates discordance between how some people feel about their reproductive health and sexual habits, and the official position of the Church. More wide-ranging and long-term ethnographic research still needs to be conducted on this issue, but the experiences I narrate below at the very least encourage us to think about the varied ways in which official Church doctrines and proclamations are being internalized by the faithful whose welfare it seeks to protect.

Nang Ising is a sixty-year-old female living in the seaside municipality in the southern part of Cebu City. She had been serving as a maid for a family for almost two decades. While she spends most days of

the week with the household she serves, she has taken up residence in a run-down hut nearby. She was driven to this situation over the years, after the birth of her fourth child with her seafarer husband. She now has seven children. Her economic situation is such that she has to struggle constantly just to feed her children and provide a proper education for them. When asked why she had the number of children that she had, she replied with a sigh of resignation in Bisaya: “Unsaon ta man” (What else am I to do?). She is by her own account a pious Catholic, which she measures according to the frequency and regularity of her attendance at Mass. She is vaguely familiar with the general attitude of the Church towards artificial contraception, including condoms. The reasons why she and her husband did not use condoms, however, were not because the Church encourages NFP, but had to do primarily with her husband’s refusal to use contraceptives. As significant was a somewhat vague notion that condoms placed the user at risk of contracting an unspecified disease. Just like the issue of condom porosity, the notion of condom use being more detrimental than useful is a view that holds some sway among many Filipinos, as the example of Nang Ising suggests. There was, in some respect, a certain fear of contraception that prevented its use.

Having said that, NFP advocated by the Church and the government was, in her view, not always applicable, particularly since her husband was with her for only a few months during the year. Significantly, Nang Ising did not see having many children as a safeguard for her retirement. On the contrary, she thought very little about her old age, and emphasized instead her sense of responsibility towards the nourishment, good education, and future career prospects of her children. She acknowledged that having many children would make this task much more difficult. She has no specific remedy — or even a plan — for this predicament except to sigh once again “unsaon ta man”, and to lift her situation up for God to take care of.

Nang Ising’s sentiments of resignation are echoed by a different demographic, although for very different reasons and under different contexts. The situations of a group of upwardly mobile young adults (two women and two men in their late twenties) living in Metro

Manila provide us further cause for reflection about the ways Filipinos internalize religious considerations in their sexual health. Like Nang Ising, each of these young people considered themselves "good, God-fearing Catholics" and are regular church-goers who do not see a strong sense of conflict between their "liberated" lifestyle and their piousness. One female, Pilar, narrates the experience of going to midnight Mass straight from a night of binge drinking at a popular night club. She reiterated that while she would occasionally indulge in the excesses of youth, she always finds a way to ensure that her religiosity does not suffer as a result and she is generally happy (and even proud) with the arrangement. This sense of negotiation extended to their views on pre-marital sexual relations. All of them admitted to having had sex casually, though with varying degrees of frequency. When asked whether or not the use of condoms was at all a factor in the nature and frequency of their sexual behavior, the two men, Randy and Jack, responded that using condoms diminished the sexual experience, and was therefore not preferable unless their partner insisted upon their use. The women, Sienna and Pilar, responded that they may insist on its use under certain circumstances. But this insistence had more to do with the stigma of having a child out of wedlock rather than as a preventative measure against contracting AIDS or some other sexually transmitted disease. However, the two women admitted that they had on occasion consented to having sex without condoms, stating with a degree of resignation that males do not usually consent to using condoms. In any case, the women, like the two men, dismiss the use of condoms on a regular basis, regarding them as not part of the "modern" dating scene, declaring that contraception "is just not the way things work".

I would not think that the situation of Nang Ising and of the young urbanized adults is atypical in both the rural and urban environs of the Philippine cities. Nang Ising's "Unsaon ta man" and the response of "not how it works" are expressions of resignation to the accumulated weight of convention that forgoes the use of artificial contraception. In both cases, the reluctance or outright refusal to use condoms had much to do with their negative associations with male virility

— that using condoms somehow diminished the sexual sensation for men. Moreover, in spite of the general awareness of the function and availability of condoms, the importance of their continued use for female reproductive health is influenced (at least in Nang Ising's case) by misconceptions about their efficacy and health benefits. The significant issue here, however, is that the decisions they make about sex and reproductive health do not seem to be based primarily upon their faith as Roman Catholics. Particularly in the case of the young urbanized adults, unprotected, premarital sexual relations are not seen as something that erodes their capacity to be good Catholics.

This underscores a negotiated form of piety in the Philippines, which inheres in spite of the vehemence of the Church's campaign against the "culture of death". I did not get the sense that there are barriers to the Church's message, as the people above did have an intuitive idea of Catholic stipulations in this regard. However, it seems from the anecdotes above that religious considerations are not paramount in their attitudes and practices towards sex and family planning, and that the notion of "fear" on which many Church positions are premised does not necessarily hold significant sway in the way the official Church might intend.

Church pastoral letters and edicts are clear and unequivocal in portraying artificial forms of contraception as morally wrong. The complexity of life as a pious individual in the Philippines involves, more often than not, contending with the demoralizing impact of poverty and material destitution. Under such circumstances, the faithful have had to negotiate with Church doctrine, making the latter's message compromise with the harsh realities of their predicaments, and sometimes in ways that involve the creative interpretation of Church policies. This is particularly poignant when one considers that most Filipinos support the passage of HB5043. Surveys since at least 2004 have shown that a majority offer in-principle support for the institutionalization of reproductive health and population control measures in the Philippines. More recent Pulse Asia and Social Weather Station (SWS) surveys demonstrate that these trends have not changed. SWS reported in 2008 that

seventy-one per cent of Catholics and sixty-eight per cent of non-Catholics surveyed were in favour of the bill’s passing (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 16 October 2008). More recently, the UN Secretary for Social Welfare, Esperanza Cabran, has called for the passage of HB5043 (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 12 November 2008). The bill has also received strong support from members of the academe, even at the Jesuit-run Ateneo de Manila where over seventy academics had signed a position paper calling for the passing of HB5043.

Divergent Voices within the Church

In response to opinion polls, however, Church leaders are unequivocal in arguing that morality — which they see as the crux of the debate on HB5043 — is not a simple matter of public consensus. Yet, while the CBCP remains firm in its stance against the passage of the bill, it cannot be said that everyone in the Church hierarchy is oblivious to the local realities highlighted by the cases above. What is significant is that there are voices of diversity within the Church, and these voices express views that do not follow the official Church position outlined in pastoral letters. The presence of a multitude of views raises questions as to why one position has dominated the public perception of the CBCP’s official position. What are the divergent views within the Church about HB5043? Are these voices prominent in the debate?

By divergent voices, I do not refer to radical reinterpretations of traditional Church doctrine. Rather, alternative views on PGRH are expressed within a particular conception of “the Catholic view” — one that is flexible enough to accommodate positions that do not unequivocally denounce contraception. This view tends to be articulated with a more acute consideration of the circumstances in which married couples must decide upon their reproductive well-being in light of their financial and other extra-doctrinal considerations. The popular media reflects at least a partial sensitivity to the divergent positions in the hierarchy. Rina David, a columnist at the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, had reconsidered her position on the “Catholic view” on PGRH policy when she became aware of alternative voices within

the Church's fold. She points to Jesuit priests Gernilo, Carroll, and Echica, who had each made their views known during a symposium on Population and Development in 2007. Father Gernilo points to an example that is virtually identical to that of Nang Ising — that is of a woman with many children and a husband working as a contractual labourer who makes only periodic returns, sometimes during her fertile period. In Father Gernilo's example, the woman decides that denying sexual relations to her husband (as stipulated by NFP) would have adverse effects on their married life and thus resorts to using a condom. Father Gernilo says that in this situation:

... a married person can be absolved in confession of the use of contraceptives even if the person cannot immediately stop using these birth control methods because of a grave reason, provided the person, among other conditions, promises his/her best to shift to NHP when the circumstances allow it. (David 2009)

In this regard, there is space within the Church to accommodate the views articulated by the Filipino priests above. These are voices, albeit with less official legitimacy than those expressed in pastoral letters, which are sensitive to the issues faced by Filipinos with regard to their reproductive health and procreative choices. Such views state that, in the context of a conjugal relationship, sexuality is *not subordinate to procreative value*. In circumstances where procreation is not financially or morally advisable, contraception can still be used in good faith without eroding one's piety as a good Catholic.

This position is supported by Fathers Carroll and Echica who argued that the Church has been placing too much emphasis on the "intrinsic evil" of contraception and on the fear factor that surrounds it. This misguided emphasis may even come at the expense of understanding the very real circumstances that might make certain kinds of artificial birth control necessary. Father Ruben Tanseco has, as far back as 2004, identified the official Church promotion of NFP as misguided in the Philippine context:

For so many poor, uneducated couples, learning NFP as the only means of family planning is too difficult... Many are not able to make it. The poor are already deprived of so many things, and to

deprive them of love-making when they spontaneously feel like doing so is to make their lives even more miserable (2004).

Such views are not the declarations of “rogue” priests who are pushing radical interpretations of Church doctrine. As the case of Father Gernilo shows, these relatively “flexible” and relevant positions remain consistent in spirit to Catholic doctrine as espoused in Vatican II.

Yet if these views are more closely attuned to public opinion, why are they not gaining more prominent coverage? A possible explanation, as Barry (2006) and others have pointed out, is that the overwhelming influence of the conservative wing of the “People Power Church” has led to the subsumption of other voices within the CBCP. The influence of Cardinal Sin is certainly a manifestation of this. What we find is a conservative element within the Church, strongly convinced of its legitimacy, positioning itself as the only guardian of morality in the country ever since the two incidences of People Power. Barry points to “interviews with women religious, veterans of anti-Marcos marches, human rights activists, and teachers in theology schools, they lamented at times how powerful Sin had become; how he had come to overshadow others in the church” (Barry 2006, p. 169).

I would add, further, that there are other factors that should be considered in assessing the discourse of the Church’s position on PGRH. That is, that by maintaining a conservative stance the CBCP is able to maintain its relevance in the political landscape of the nation because alternative perspectives within the Church, while more consistent with popular consensus and the everyday realities of Filipino life, do not lend themselves to the Church’s capacity for keeping in check political excess in governance. A generally conservative, rather than progressive stance, is more conducive towards maintaining and enhancing the Church’s political relevance. What purposes are served by maintaining a conservative position on PGRH, one that remains beholden to sources of legitimacy and authority that emanate outside the local realities of its flock?

The Church as Political Vanguard

If the official Church position is not representative of the view of a majority of its constituents, as the surveys conducted might suggest, it would be interesting to inquire into how Church leaders and the CBCP justify their conservative position on PGRH. What is significant to note is that the CBCP's publicly stated position on HB5043 derives its gravitas as a deployment of wider Roman Catholic doctrine that is particularly amenable to legitimizing their role as guardians of political morality. What we find, in the Church promotion of Vatican inspired authority, is a rhetorical manoeuvre in which debates about demography and public health are steered into the domain of corruption. The very confidence in the moral righteousness of their proclamations typically carry with them indictments on the political culture in the country which, in many respects, is identified as the *real* cause of population explosion and declining standards of reproductive health. This process can be seen in two contexts: first, in the act of sacramental denial, and second, in the specific ideals of *Humanae Vitae*, which I describe in more detail below.

In the Philippines, it had been seen as providential that 2008 was the fortieth anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*. On the day of the anniversary, the Archdiocese of Manila in conjunction with several pro-life groups waged a prayer rally to reiterate the Church's uncompromising position to uphold the principles of that Papal encyclical. What was highlighted by the rally was not simply that contraception was morally wrong, but that the Philippine Church had the backing of a "higher", transcendent authority of the Vatican itself. There has been little, if any, mention among Filipino Bishops of the "Majority Report" that so characterized the controversy surrounding *Humanae Vitae* in the 1960s. Rather, the thrust of the rally was that Church leaders were not merely expressing a localized mandate, but were to all intents and purposes agents with a wider global, indeed universal, responsibility. It is ironic, that while Church leaders and those against the bill declare that it was drafted using concepts

foreign to the Filipino context (from the UN or from the UNDP, for example), their appeal to *Humanae Vitae* likewise reveals a deference to principles that were conceptualized in a context that may well be as far removed from the local Filipino experience.

Humanae Vitae was also particularly relevant because it contained within it an exhortation that was overtly political. This resonated strongly with the concerns of Filipino Bishops, particularly in the politically volatile climate of the Philippines in 2008 with the issue of President Arroyo's own misconduct and the upcoming elections of 2010. Article 23 of *Humanae Vitae* states that:

No one can, without being grossly unfair, make divine Providence responsible for what clearly seems to be the result of misguided governmental policies, of an insufficient sense of social justice, of a selfish accumulation of material goods, and finally of a culpable failure to undertake those initiatives and responsibilities which would raise the standard of living of peoples and their children. If only all governments which were able would do what some are already doing so nobly, and bestir themselves to renew their efforts and their undertakings!

The context of the Church rally in 2008 then takes on an added significance. For in commemorating *Humanae Vitae*, it becomes clear that the Church's position on HB5043 has as much to do with issues of political corruption as it does with reproductive health and population growth. Church leaders have been at pains to deflect attention *away* from the link between population growth and reproductive health, towards the argument that the main cause of poverty lies in the political and moral decadence of the Filipino political process, as well as with the unscrupulous persons who participate in it. In this respect, the position of the CBCP is entirely consistent with that of *Humanae Vitae*. Take, for example, an editorial on the official CBCP website which articulates a common refrain from Church leaders that reproduces the spirit of the Vatican encyclical:

What is undeniably true is Filipinos are getting poorer because of massive extravagance and endemic corruption in [principal

author of HB5043] Lagman's government. If only congressmen are honest with their pork barrels, which they are afraid to part with ... they will have saved annually billions of pesos enough to buy food, health, education and basic services to the impoverished Pinoy' (CBCP online editorial "Who's Spreading Disinformation")

The root cause of poverty, this logic contends, is economic mismanagement by a corrupt political culture. As such, it is towards corruption, not at reducing the population growth rate per se, that lawmakers' attention should be directed. In this sense, all the debates about the bill are misguided so long as they focus on the medical and demographic issues alone.

This indictment on corruption has a more direct manifestation. A more explicit link between the CBCP's transcendental mandate and its crusade against a morally bereft political culture can be seen in the issue of sacramental denial. The Archbishop of Ozamis, Jose Dosado, had, in July 2008, released a pastoral letter which called for "pro-abortion legislators" to not present themselves for communion, or else priests would be within their rights to deny them the Eucharist. This was to be until such legislators were to repent for being in an "objective situation of sin" in which they fostered conditions for abortion. Later, the call for sacramental denial was targeted more explicitly to those legislators who supported HB5043.

The call for the denial of the Eucharist was potent because it was shown to have derived its legitimacy from Pope Benedict himself. Archbishop Dosado cited specifically the general principles of then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger in 2004 entitled "Worthiness to Receive Holy Communion". This document gives ministers moral and official sanction to deny the Eucharist to those deemed in "formal cooperation in evil". Further sanction is drawn from the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts declaration "Holy Communion and Divorced, Civilly Remarried Catholics" (2000), which stressed with equal vehemence the capacity of priests to withhold communion. So closely entwined was Archbishop Dosado's pastoral letter with these

wider sources of legitimacy that newspaper reports that followed shortly thereafter conflated the words of the Archbishop with those of Ratzinger's document itself. The official online news portal of the CBCP for example, in reporting about Dosado's claims, blurs the distinction between the Archbishop's words and those of the Pontiff (cf. CBCP News 14 July 2008).

The message that was being given is that one's support for HB5043 is seen as completely definitive of one's personal character and the extent of one's loyalty to Catholic principles. Such calls, tantamount to a kind of excommunication of even prominent (and perhaps devout) Catholic politicians, would ostensibly serve to make people aware of the consequences of conducting one's affairs in opposition to Church teachings. But again, the message and rhetorical strategy we see here is consistent with that employed by making explicit reference to *Humanae Vitae*: that the cause of the Filipino predicament is not about issues of demography, but of corruption — the emphasis is not on issues of statistical projections, but on moral decadence.

The celebration of *Humanae Vitae* and sacramental denial draws our attention to wider controversies of a political nature, particularly in relation to the moral legitimacy of those in office and how the Church has acted upon their self-proclaimed mandate to ensure their capacity to lead. The specific linkage of the debate over HB5043 to the legacy of *Humanae Vitae* enabled Church leaders to indict political figures who were remiss in their duties of ensuring the well-being of those they serve. Sacramental denial is portrayed as the appropriate Eucharistic response to such transgressions, and it is its complete confidence in the moral legitimacy of its call that has emboldened Church leaders such as Archbishops Dosado and Cruz. More specifically the attitudes demonstrated by these two issues go to the heart of the CBCP's stand that insists that it is not towards rampant population growth that lawmakers should devote their attention but towards addressing moral issues that are embedded in the very fabric of the political culture of the nation. Reiterating traditional Catholic teachings on family and sexual morality enables

the Church to deploy its post-authoritarian crusade against political misconduct. In acting as the arbiter of sexual morality, the Church simultaneously fulfils a political duty in which the debate is deflected away from issues of sexual morality and demography, to one of political corruption and decadence.

Conclusion

On an official level, the CBCP hierarchy's fundamental opposition to proposed legislation on population growth and reproductive health is that it promotes a mentality of promiscuity, which may well lead to the naturalization of extramarital sexual relations and, eventually, abortions. Although most of the proposed congressional bills refer only to the use of artificial contraception, the campaign against it has been used as a vehicle to attack all social vices which the Church holds reprehensible and morally corrupt. Divorce, euthanasia, and homosexuality are issues against which the Church has made strong pronouncements in various pastoral letters and edicts. The debate over PGRH in 2008–9, as such, has been an occasion in which the Church has been able to reiterate a conservative stance on abortion and extramarital sex in particular, one that remains consistent with wider sources of influence and authority. The Church's position remained firm towards the end of 2009, with Cebu's Cardinal Vidal mandating an ordered prayer to be said in all parishes against the passage of the bill.

It remains to be seen whether HB5043 shall be passed into law. As the Fourteenth Congress draws to a close, proponents of the bill have threatened to block various unrelated bills if deliberation on HB5043 is removed from the House's priority agenda. And while no other bill of this kind has reached the stage of plenary deliberation, advocates of the bill identify the Church's influence as the primary reason why a vote on the bill could be placed on the backburner. While the influence of the CBCP's pronouncements and mandates is strong, what we have seen, however, is that there may well be a discordance between Church proclamations regarding sexual morality

and the economic and social vicissitudes people face in their daily lives. The lives we have peered into in this essay are but a few, but they should, nevertheless, encourage us to examine the divergent voices from clergy within the Church hierarchy who express an opinion that goes against the hard line stance of official CBCP proclamations. We have also discussed the notion that in light of the CBCP's historical role in politics, such alternative voices may have become subsumed by the conservative agenda, even though the former may correspond more closely to the situation of many Filipinos and to public opinion. In some respects, the legitimacy that the Church had earned from their involvement in People Power has seen the dominance of conservative factions within the hierarchy, which largely determine the overall CBCP stance in relation to issues such as population growth and reproductive health. HB5043 will remain a point of contestation between the CBCP's dominant faction and the bill's proposers, for as long as the life issues which the bill seeks to address remain associated with a Church-defined "culture of death".

NOTES

1. This is not to underestimate the importance of the other Roman Catholic institutions, such as the Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines, and of the Protestant Church in the Philippines, manifested in such institutions as the National Council of Churches and Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches. Among these ecclesiastical institutions, however, it is the CBCP that has served as the arbiter of the official Church positions on matters of faith, theology, and doctrine.
2. The significance of the poverty-population-economics nexus is typically illustrated by comparing the Philippines situation with Thailand, which, in the mid-1970s, had almost similar levels of population and growth rate. As economists such as Pernia show, the two countries had comparable levels of average income, with the Philippines GDP per capita only slightly ahead. The statistics in the 1990s however show a staggering reversal. While Thailand was able to grow its average income at 8 times the 1975 levels, the Philippines only grew 2.6 times its original level. Another telling statistic is that the kingdom had been

able to keep in check its population growth, at an average of 1.6 per cent over the twenty-five year period, while the Philippines grew at 2.6 per cent per year in the 1990s. This has encouraged economists and demographers to suggest that population dynamics account for the stark differences in economic performance, and for the need to consider the demographic dividend in plotting a viable developmental and fiscal policy. In short, if the Philippines is to make any inroads into poverty reduction, its lawmakers need to address the problem of population growth.

3. This bill is based on House Bill 3773 entitled “Integrated Reproductive Health and Population Reduction Bill”, which was drafted by fifty-one congressmen and debated in the plenary session of Congress in 2006. When it was debated in Congress in early 2006, it received the support of more than 135 lawmakers, as well as local government officials, health officials, and family planning advocates such as Family Planning Organization of the Philippines, and the Philippine Legislators’ Committee on Population and Development.

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