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Catholic Democratization: Religious Networks and Political Agency in the Philippines and Timor-Leste

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In this article, I compare the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines and in Timor-Leste in the 1980s and 1990s in discussing the extent to which transnational religious networks have been a factor in the capacity of the Church to advance a democratization agenda. Religious actors have influenced and shaped the structural and operational parameters of democratization in many parts of the world. Political theorist Samuel Huntington (1991) has observed that Roman Catholic religious teachings since the 1930s have corresponded to what has been described as the 'Catholic wave' of democratization. How can we situate the Philippines and Timor-Leste—the two most predominantly Roman Catholic countries in Asia—within this scholarship? What roles do religious networks play in community-based adaptation strategies, particularly in the context of nation-state formation in postcolonial and post-conflict situations? I pursue these questions by framing a comparative analysis around two thematic currents. The first explores the sociopolitical ramifications of the Roman Catholic Church as an inherently networked institution. I consider the notion of Catholicism as a global interconnection of clerical hierarchies that recognize pontifical authority as a personification of the unity of the Church. The second reconsiders the notion that the political interventions of the Church are tantamount to and coterminous with an endorsement of a particular form of political governance, in this case liberal democracy, as indicated in the 'Catholic wave' thesis. Instead of assuming that Church leaders homogeneously favour liberal democracy, I consider the emphasis by the Second Vatican Council on protecting the dignity of the human person, particularly that of the poor, and how this emphasis conditions the political agency of the Church in both countries.

Keywords: Roman Catholicism, democratization, human rights, Catholic wave, the Philippines, Timor-Leste.

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In this article, I examine the extent to which the Roman Catholic Church has been a factor in processes of democratic transition in Southeast Asia. Prominent political scientists such as Samuel Huntington (1991) have argued that religious actors and institutions have influenced and shaped a 'Catholic wave' of democratization in virtually all parts of the world. This trend is driven by the observation that Roman Catholic religious discourse since the 1930s has effectively constituted an institutional endorsement of liberal democratic ideals. Pope John Paul II, for example, is thought by political scientist Daniel Philpott (2004, p. 35) to have exemplified this notion when the former pontiff called for an 'authentic democracy' in the context of tumultuous political transitions. However, I agree with the political scientist John Anderson, who has pointed out that Huntington's thesis does not provide the ethnographic and analytic depth to address the variation in the Catholic responses to democracy (Anderson 2007, p. 384). It is in this vein that I inquire into how we can assess the resonance of the Catholic wave thesis in Southeast Asia, particularly in the two predominantly Roman Catholic democracies, the Philippines and Timor-Leste. What roles do religious networks and actors play in sociopolitical upheaval, particularly in the context of nation-state formation in postcolonial and authoritarian situations in the region?

A good way to convey the analytical theme of this article is by examining the experience and perspectives of Roman Catholic clergy in Southeast Asia who were themselves deeply involved in the vicissitudes of sociopolitical upheaval in their own countries. Take, for example, Father Domingos, an East Timorese priest who was heavily involved in the struggle against the Indonesian occupation of his country. The extent of his involvement in the East Timorese resistance against Indonesian occupation is attested to by several reports that indicate his being "the subject of constant psychological and physical harassment" by the Indonesian military (Timor Link 1994, p. 4) for providing logistical support for resistance fighters. By the late 1990s, Father Domingos was directly involved with politicians and freedom fighters alike in the process of drafting the Magna Carta that would see Timor-Leste emerge as a sovereign democratic state.

In recent years, Father Domingos has frequently been called upon by government officials for his advice and intervention on matters of policy, governance and mediation. When I asked him in 2019 to give a general account of his role as a political actor, he was definitive in his response: "The Church is not involved in politics … I am not a politician." He insisted, "the Church is concerned only with human rights of our community".

Father Domingos' insistence on his own separation from the realm of politics is one that echoes a declaration made by Timor-Leste's most prominent cleric, Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo. In the "Document on the East Timor Catholic Church on East Timor Nowadays", published by the Dili archdiocese in 1994, the then Monsignor Belo stated unequivocally that "the Church is not a political institution" and thus "should not be allowed to mix up with political affairs, nor has the bond with any political system…" (Belo 1994). The spirit of this declaration resonates strongly with the many Filipino clergy whom I have had a chance to interact with in the course of my research. While it is commonly admitted that the Church has been embroiled in sociopolitical issues, this involvement is often qualified with an insistence on a distinction between religious agency and outright political intervention. Most significantly, what is reiterated by religious actors is that the involvement by the Church with politics is only possible when political intervention is theologically compatible and coterminous with the mandate of pastoral care. What is missing in much of the analyses of the political capacities of religious actors is a more theologically nuanced perspective on the emergence of this compatibility, particularly in an Asian context. It is in this vein that I engage in a dialogue with the contributors to this volume, with whom I share a common concern with discussing how the Roman Catholic Church in Southeast Asia channels its embeddedness in global networks towards, as Brown and Tran outline in this issue's introduction, "regional problems, historic events and specific national contexts". I seek to drive this conversation forward by focusing on two thematic currents, as follows.

First, I seek to properly contextualize the principle of the Catholic wave thesis by examining the Roman Catholic Church as a transnational institution that exists in various local and ecclesial communities and is, as Wuthnow and Offutt describe it, "distinctively influenced by national cultural and political context, it has connections with the wider world and is influenced by these relations" (2008, p. 209). I seek to emphasize the following heuristic premise: the 'Church' can be seen as a universal assembly led by a global interconnection of clerical hierarchies that recognizes pontifical authority as the personification of its unity. This is a global interconnection, moreover, in which the core precepts of the Church are made to address the varied local experiences and ontologies of its diverse congregations. It is crucial, I argue, to consider the emphasis by the Church on the local when examining its efforts to appropriate the sociopolitical ramifications of Roman Catholic doctrine, particularly those that emerged from the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), if we are to properly assess the Catholic wave thesis in Southeast Asia.

What I emphasize in this paper is not so much an evaluation of a uniform political philosophy from the Church. Rather, I seek to consider the post-conciliar pastoral-theological concepts and methodologies that have encouraged religious agents, particularly in Catholic-majority countries, to confront politics as an extension of their religious mandate in specific local contexts. I consider the nuances of how Churches in Asia interpreted and deployed the Vatican's post-conciliar prescriptions by examining the theological framework known as 'reception'. In its endorsements of a free, pluralist and virtuous society, the 'reception' to Vatican II emphasized the role of the Church as "the agent of culture, rather than a conventional political player" (Troy 2009, pp. 1096–97).

Having discussed the emergence of the receptive Church as a post-conciliar network, I then examine in more detail the influence of Roman Catholic religious institutions and agents in periods of tumultuous political transition in the Philippines and Timor-Leste, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. Throughout this period, in both

countries, democratic principles were invoked by clergy and lay people alike in their efforts to confront the challenges of sociopolitical upheaval. In the Philippines under martial law, the Church operated in a climate of social and political instability, brought about by the denial of civil liberties, government militarization and increasing activity from left-wing insurgency. Meanwhile, in Timor-Leste, the Church pursued its mandate of pastoral care in the context of an active resistance against an often-violent Indonesian occupation that followed the withdrawal of the Portuguese colonial administration. What I seek to pursue in this juxtaposition is a consideration of the various manners in which the Church experienced the power of the state and the pastoral-theological options that were available to the clergy in their respective settings (Himes 2006, p. 16).

This article is a contribution to a more recent stream of comparative area studies that examines intra-regional variations in the timing and effectiveness of democratic adoption (Ahram, Köllner and Sil 2018; Basedau and Köllner 2007). The broader implication of this area of research relates to the question of whether there are certain explanations of democratic adoption that are applicable universally, or whether the parameters of democratization are more properly understood as predicated upon regional or historical contingencies. The findings presented here represent the latter position.

Differentiation, Democracy and the Catholic Wave

Political theorist Daniel Philpott (2007, p. 509) documents a "historically impressive outbreak of democracy" involving at least thirty countries worldwide between 1974 and 1989. In so doing, Philpott corroborates Samuel Huntington's theory of a "third wave of democracy" (Huntington 1991, pp. 12–14) by pointing out that the annual reports of the US-based think tank Freedom House (2004, 2005) indicate an increase in the proportion of electoral democracies between 1994 and 2005 (from 41 to 62 per cent), with corresponding increases in the number of "free" countries and decreases in "partly free" and "not free" countries (Philpott 2007, p. 509). These scholars

argue, moreover, that this 'third wave' of democratization was an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic one. This is an assertion that is based on two key premises: the first being a statistical dominance of Roman Catholic countries among those that have been democratized, and the second being a seeming convergence between this trend and formal theological declarations of support for the ideals of liberal democracy from the highest authorities of the Roman Curia.

For Philpott, the political agency of the Church is a function of the separation of church and state, conceptualized by another political theorist, Alfred Stepan, as the "twin tolerations" (2000, p. 37) that is an inherent feature of liberal democracy. In this differentiated political configuration, the Church inhabits an activist space in which it can act as a positive agent of change (Philpott 2004, p. 33), even if this puts it in a position of friction or conflict with the state. "From their differentiated position", argued Philpott, "[the Church] can engage in the proto-democratic politics of contesting the regime's legitimacy. From its differentiated nook, the Church can wield the tools of democracy to bring about a democratic regime" (Philpott 2004, p. 42). For Philpott, the promulgation of liberal democracy in religiously plural states is premised upon the establishment of lawful, consensual differentiation, which has two complementary elements: "a religion that seeks influence, but not standing constitutional authority, and a state that allows its religious communities—all of them, including minorities—to practice and participate" (Philpott 2007, p. 523). This view resonates with that of Peter L. Berger, who argued that two fundamental principles underlie the commensurability between Christianity and democracy: (1) both place great emphasis on the protection of human rights and (2) both subscribe to the secular principle of differentiation, of Caesar's city and God's city (Berger 2004, p. 76).

The modern Church is an interconnected organization comprised of a community explicitly united in faith, worship and mission. The Church, in this respect, encompasses all legitimately organized groups who jointly proclaim, in accordance with the book of Ephesians 4:5 (NRSV-CE), "one word, one faith, one baptism",

through the connection of clergy to the various levels of ecclesial inspiration and authority. As a formal institution, the Church comprises multiple layers of organization that flow down from its centre, the Holy See. From there, the worldwide operations of the Church are headed by a Pope who directs a Curia of administrators and bureaucrats under an apostolic constitution. The Curia in turn is comprised of a multitude of tribunals, councils, commissions and dicasteries, which are collectively mandated with administering matters of state, finance, canon law and doctrine. The Holy See has direct authority to appoint and oversee the activities of the world's community of bishops, who manage the various local territorial units of the Church, including the dioceses and archdioceses, which encompass the multitude of local parishes. The bishops also meet in national or regional episcopal conferences, drawing inspiration and ecclesial direction from the statements and directives of the Holy See in the fulfilment of their respective pastoral responsibilities. A Synod of Bishops, chosen from clerics around the world, forms an advisory body for the Pope in promulgating the protection and growth of faith (Ferrari 2006, p. 34).

Huntington's Catholic wave thesis pivots off the notion that the centrally networked nature of the Church was an enabling factor in its capacity to endorse the principle of democracy. This is based on the underlying assumption of continuity between papal declarations and its vernacular, on the ground, enactment by clerical agents. Implicit in this formulation is that churches outside Rome accept the doctrinal 'gifts' and directives of the Vatican in enacting its respective practical and liturgical reforms. "Once Rome had decided that democracy was a good thing", argued Peter L. Berger, "Bishops from Peru to the Philippines became ardent advocates of democratization. Thus Samuel P. Huntington was correct in identifying the Roman church as a key factor in the 'third wave' of democratization in the 1970s and 1980s" (Berger 2004, p. 77). A somewhat tempered position on this theme is offered by Philpott, who argued that "Papal preferences, though, are not always mediated smoothly as they gain distance from Rome", indicating that Roman Catholic agents, particularly

local elites, have adopted and deployed the directives of the Vatican in ways attuned to their respective sociopolitical circumstances and aspirations (Philpott 2004, p. 42). Nevertheless, Philpott underscored the almost immediate capacity of the Church to galvanize mass action, enabling for instance a peripatetic pope "to travel to a country and speak to ready crowds of Catholics, sometimes numbering in the millions" (Philpott 2004, p. 42).

Under this framework of the Catholic wave, therefore, the Church and Catholic organizations in Asia are characterized as having the autonomy and capacity not only to govern their own ranks but also to lead their congregations in mass protest against colonial or authoritarian regimes. The Philippines and Timor-Leste are categorized into particular typologies of the Catholic wave. The Church in Timor-Leste can be likened to the fourth variant of the Catholic wave in African Churches, where the clergy came to oppose postcolonial regimes through a range of strategies, including politically inflected worship services, educational programmes and cooperation with political parties and resistance movements.

As political scientist Alynna Lyon has observed, the East Timorese Church "served as the only vehicle of political communication to challenge claims by the Indonesian government" (2013, p. 83). The Philippines, meanwhile, is typically associated with the pattern of Churches in Spain and Portugal as they gradually took on universal Church teachings towards critically engaging with, if not altogether resisting or overthrowing, authoritarian regimes (Philpott 2007, p. 512). In both cases the Church is represented under this schema as the only viable civil society that could stand up to colonial hegemony and authoritarian rule.

While political scientists have paid significant attention to how differentiated positions facilitated this kind of transnational political engagement, less attention has been given to how local and regional churches have matured in dialogue with the developments in the teachings of the Universal Church. Huntington, Berger and Philpott do recognize the significance of theological and liturgical reforms within the Roman Catholic Church. However, less discussion has

been given to ascertaining exactly how the post-conciliar reforms manifested pastoral strategies that in turn conditioned the religious engagement with politics, particularly in the context of political and social instability and transition. It is to this effort, which entails a discussion of how the teachings of the Second Vatican Council were received in Asia, that I shall now turn.

Vatican II and the 'Signs of the Times'

Those who would argue that the Church has endorsed democracy would point to Pope John XXIII's encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, which, in addressing the issue of "universal peace", declared that "The fact that authority comes from God does not mean that men have no power to choose those who are to rule the State, or to decide upon the type of government they want.… Hence the above teaching is consonant with any genuinely democratic form of government" (Green 2013). Similarly, an endorsement of democracy is imputed from Pope John Paul II's encyclicals *Centesimus Annus* (The Hundredth Year) (1991) and *Evangelical Vitae* (The Gospel of Life) (1995). These documents are understood as declaring that an 'authentic democracy' can be desirable, but only if its adoption is tempered by an emphasis on upholding justice, morality and traditional Church values. The Church thus calls for a mode of governance that emphasizes the effort to "recover the basic elements of a vision of the relationship between civil law and moral law, which are put forward by the Church, but which are also part of the patrimony of the great juridical traditions of humanity" (John Paul II 1995, no. 70, 71).[1]

It is significant to note, however, that John Paul II himself explicitly denied any specific endorsement of liberal democracy. In 1987, the Pope responded to a critique that the Roman Catholic Church was violating the separation of church and state in endorsing liberal democracy. He declared, "I am not the evangelizer of democracy; I am the evangelizer of the Gospel. To the Gospel message, of course, belong all the problems of human rights; and if democracy

means human rights, it also belongs to the message of the Church" (cited in Philpott 2004, p. 35).

In making this retort, the Pope was reiterating the ideals expressed in the encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, which features a critique of 'democracy without values'—a political ideology driven by agnosticism and sceptical relativism and a neglect of a correct conception of the human person which can "easily turn into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism" (John Paul II 1991, no. 46). The Pope emphasized the centrality of human rights in the mandate of the Church, which is in turn coterminous with the capacity of the Church for political engagement. The objective of the following section is to examine in closer detail the convergence of pastoral-theological and political agency as it emerged with even greater clarity following the Second Vatican Council. After this analysis I will seek to examine how the convergence was received by churches in Asia.

The Second Vatican Council, held from 1962 to 1965, was the first gathering of Roman Catholic religious leaders in almost a century. It was called by Pope John XXIII to foster an environment of dialogue about the doctrine and liturgical practices of the Church in a way that encapsulated the institution's openness to operate meaningfully in the contemporary context. While Vatican II is seen to have set the foundation for the modern Church, it did not introduce new ideas of reform. Rather, the gathering brought ideas existing from previous years to the forefront of Catholic theology, spirituality and practice (Himes 2006, p. 17) so that the Church could, in the words of the Pope himself, "contribute more efficaciously to the solution of the problems of the modern age" (Abbott 1966, pp. 704–5). On the whole, the council gave greater purpose and theological clarity to how the social and political engagements of the Church should fit with its wider theology and ecclesiology (Himes 2006, p. 23).

For many generations prior to the council, certainly, there had been the implicit assumption that Church leaders should reflect upon and act on matters of politics, particularly as they related to governments

and states. What is most significant about Vatican II, however, is that it engendered what Jose Casanova described as "the transformation of the Catholic Church from a state-centered to a society-centered institution" (Himes 2006, pp. 25–26; Casanova 1994, p. 71). This is to say that the council did not just provide a blueprint for how Church leaders were to deal with governments, but it also provided the Church, particularly the clergy, with a broader array of images and metaphors for a specific kind of ecclesial self-understanding, one that reiterated the mandate of the modern Church of directly and proactively relating to the plight of its flock by protecting human rights and defending religious liberty (Himes 2006, p. 17).

For example, in 1965, Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Dignitatis Humanae* declared that religious liberty is a human right intrinsic in the dignity of the human person (Philpott 2004, p. 35). The council's *locus theologicus*, or theological point of departure, is the "humanum", comprised of the various aspects of humanity, human history and society, and human dignity (Kroeger 1987, p. 4). *Dignitatis Humanae* stipulated that no person is to be coerced in matters of religion, and that anyone should be able to pursue a quest for truth in a way that upholds their human dignity.

By implication, any institution—state or otherwise—that coerces compliance with or inhibits the free practice of a particular religion must be taken to task for overstepping its authority. This endorsement of religious liberty and freedom of conscience as a fundamental facet of human rights represents a significant departure, particularly from the declarations of previous popes.

Pope John XXIII conceived of the pastoral-theological mandate of the council as a response to the 'signs of the times', which was first expressed in the apostolic constitution *Humane Salutes* and later became the foundation for the council document *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church in the Modern World) (Abbott 1966, p. 703). On the one hand, reading the 'signs' connoted a critical discernment of human history, manifesting a faith-inspired interpretation of how God can be made present and active in the aspirations for equality, peace, justice and development. On the other hand, 'signs' was

also a methodology of action that involved expressing solidarity with those advocating liberation in both the secular and political realm. It is in light of this more socially engaged dialectic ethos of ‘signs of the times’ as discernment-to-action that the Vatican II can be seen as a turning point in Church relations to politics, and to democracy in particular.

The Church is able to act politically precisely because post-conciliar Roman Catholic theology enables its leaders to characterize their sociopolitical engagement as external to politics. Far from an ideological or political commitment, ‘signs of the times’ is an eminently pastoral method of engagement oriented specifically to relating the Gospel to concrete social and political vicissitudes. Indeed, *Gaudium et Spes* stipulates that post-conciliar Church involvement in politics is not a political act per se but rather a facet in the religious mandate to defend human dignity, espoused and reiterated to theological centrality in Vatican II (Himes 2006, p. 23). In so doing, Church agents are not abrogating for themselves specific technocratic or bureaucratic competencies. Rather, Vatican II reiterated those competencies that pertain to the moral dimensions of political and social life. The confrontation with democracy is, in this respect, part of a larger religious mission that must be promulgated even if it brings the faithful in contact with realms of politics, economics and culture.

I agree with political scientist Jodok Troy, who argued that “the argument for a sea change in Catholic political theology as a consequence of Vatican II, is on its own insufficient for a comprehensive explanation of the church’s championing of democratization in the last quarter of the twentieth century” (Troy 2009, p. 1097). It is important to understand how clergy in evangelical settings outside the immediate ambit of the Vatican interpreted and implemented these ideals. Political theorists such as John Anderson have emphasized the importance of providing ethnographic and analytic depth in assessing the variation in Catholic responses to democratic ideals (Anderson 2007, p. 384). It is to the case of Asia and its democratization that we shall now turn.

Vatican II and its Asian 'Reception'

Further on from Vatican II, the "Magna Carta of the local Church" (found in the 1971 apostolic letter *Octogesima Adveniens*) encouraged enhancing the capacity for national or regional episcopal conferences to be more vocal and proactive in representing the problems and concerns of local Churches (Himes 2006, p. 27). In effect, Vatican II also heralded what Francis Hadisumarta, the Carmelite bishop of Manikwari, Indonesia, called "a radical decentralization of the Latin Rite" (quoted in Phan 2006, p. 17). By this he meant a devolution of the main ceremonies and rituals of the Roman Church into a host of liturgical practices consonant with local realities in Asia. While this locally embedded manner of practising the faith remains "united collegially in faith and trust", the main emphasis of this devolution is that local priests in Asia are "listening to each other through synodal instruments at parish, deanery, vicariate, diocesan, national/regional, continental, and international levels" (quoted in Phan 2006, p. 17).

In examining this devolution of the Latin Rite, theologian and scholar Peter L. Phan endorsed the concept of 'reception', which refers to the community affirmation of Church teachings as much more complicated than a blind acceptance of what is recommended in the process of Church reform. The Roman Catholic theological scholar Thomas Rausch described the classical notions of reception as "acceptance by local churches of particular ecclesiastical or conciliar decisions" (1986, p. 497). With respect to churches in Asia, however, Phan emphasized a more contemporary concept of 'reception' that conveys a stronger sense of resistance or subversion, one that "may at times involve rejection, total or partial [and is] always a re-making, or to use the title of the book of one of our colleagues, an 'inventing' of the tradition" (Phan 2006, p. 2). This kind of reception evokes the ways in which local churches responded to Vatican II to "name [their] own reality and devise a pastoral strategy in response to accounts for the development of various initiatives that have had political significance in particular locales" (Himes 2006, p. 20). In

Asia, the Federation of Asian Bishop's Conference (FABC) emerged from this spirit, heralding in the decades to come a "great synodal epoch" in Asia (Phan 2006, p. 17).

The FABC is a voluntary consortium of churches in Asia that was established in 1972 with approval of the Holy See. Its goal is the total development of the peoples of Asia by facilitating a tripartite dialogue that corresponds to realities specific to the region; namely, a dialogue of liberation of Asia's poor, with their culture and customs (inculturation), and with other faith traditions. While it is the case that the FABC emerged as a response to the post-conciliar Church reforms, it is also through the conference that churches in Asia have expressed their distinctiveness. Phan has argued that while the reforms that emerged from Vatican II were well meaning for Christendom as a whole, they were premised upon what he described as "a massive misdiagnosis of the situation of Asian Christianity" (2006, p. 13). This was, moreover, a misdiagnosis that highlighted the Roman Catholic Church as a centralized institution in which local parishes simply implement directives passed down from Rome. Bishop Francis Hadisumarta conveyed a sentiment that arose in the Asian Synod of Bishops, one that problematized the notion of an uninterrupted, top-down conveyance of Church teachings prominent in the Catholic wave thesis: "the Catholic Church is not a monolithic pyramid", said Hadisumarta. "Bishops are not branch secretaries waiting for instruction from headquarters! We are a communion of local churches" (Phan 2006, p. 16).

Drawing from such sentiments, the very creation of the FABC was framed upon a desire to foster a stronger sense of solidarity among churches in Asia. Inspired by episcopal consortiums like the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, Asian bishops, through the FABC, sought to facilitate a corporate identity in a way that enhanced their pastoral effectiveness. As such, there is an understanding among local parishes that an Asian form of liberation theology entails the clerical prerogative to assess the situation that prevails in their own country in a way that, in the words of Pope Paul VI, "draws principles of reflection, normal of judgement and directives for action from the

social teaching of the Church" (1971, p. 4; cited in Kroeger 1987, p. 22). It is in the context of the post-conciliar decentralization of the Church, which brought forth the promulgation of Asian forms of liberation theology, that the political agency of churches in the Philippines and Timor-Leste should be assessed.

The Philippines: Democratization as an Asian 'Theology of Struggle'

The end of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 coincided with the four-hundredth anniversary of the systematic evangelization of the Philippines. It was an occasion not lost upon the local clerical hierarchy who, through a joint pastoral letter, declared the beginning of a 'new evangelization' inspired and instructed by Vatican II (Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines 1965, p. 380). The year 1965 was declared a jubilee year, which heralded several milestones in the history of the institutional Church: the establishment in 1966 of the East Asian Pastoral Institute, the Philippine Foreign Mission Society and the holding of the Third National Eucharistic Congress (Kroeger 1987, p. 4). That year was also the year in which Ferdinand E. Marcos ascended to the presidency, and with that would come a period of political turmoil and instability. Marcos would declare martial law in 1972, taking advantage of general sociopolitical discontent and anxiety over the rising threat of communism, Islamic separatism in the south and the domestic instability caused by labour union strikes and student protests. At that point in time, the approximately eighty-five per cent of Filipinos who professed Roman Catholicism relied greatly on the network of parishes and local priests for support and moral guidance.

Drawing inspiration from Latin American forms of alternative social organization and economic development, Filipino clergy advocated for models of social support and development that were rooted in Base Ecclesial Communities (BEC), eschewing clientelist-driven political-economic configurations. Filipino priests and nuns engaged directly in on-the-ground societal analysis of the socio-

economic state of BECs as a framework for enacting a faith-based social mission of development-liberation. Church actions in society advocated initiatives such as the formation of cooperatives and the strengthening of government-sponsored social security measures as a means to promote human development (Rivera 2010, p. 89). BECs were also conceived of as open spaces in civil society that could ostensibly foster forms of 'engaged criticism' by emphasizing the cultivation of the 'leadership and organizational skills' of its members. BECs were, in that regard, a mode of faith-based development-liberation premised upon empowering people to take active responsibility for their own affairs (Anderson 2007, p. 391). This ethos would become manifested in a Church-wide focus on social action programmes among rural peasants, urban squatters and wage earners, which expanded in scope in the latter part of the 1960s and early 1970s.

The state-sanctioned elimination of political opposition left the Roman Catholic Church as one of the few institutions that could keep the regime in check, particularly with respect to the increasing incidence of human rights abuses. However, the Filipino Church as a formal institution was relatively late in calling out the state for its involvement in human rights abuses (Kroeger 1986, p. 23). The direct engagement by the Philippine Church in ameliorating social problems was premised upon non-political, non-partisan confrontation that avoided pulpit politics. Political scientist Robert L. Youngblood (1978) has argued that this was in large part due to a liberal-conservative divide within the Catholic Church in the Philippines. On the one hand, conservative elements within the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), then composed of around seventy-six bishops led by Cardinal Rosales, were on the whole supportive of the principle of martial law for fear that a Marxist-Maoist socialist alternative would undermine the stability and authority of the Church (Youngblood 1978, p. 507). Rather than an outright denouncement of the martial law regime, the pastoral letter entitled "Statement of the CBCP Administrative Council on Martial Law" (1972) expressed a wariness to the dangers

presented by the instrumentalization or ideological co-option of the priests from the left of the political spectrum.

To be sure, there was a significant progressive voice within the institution of the Church itself. For example, the Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines (AMRSP), which then represented about 2,500 priests and 7,000 nuns, promulgated an advocacy that was more vocal in criticizing the excesses of the regime and the ineffectiveness of its policies. An influential personification of the position of the Church was Jaime Cardinal Sin of Manila, who characterized the actions of his archdiocese as those of critical collaboration. It was clear from the pastoral letters issued by the Church hierarchy that on the whole it was not prepared to mount a direct confrontation with the authoritarian regime, particularly as the Marcos regime was open to preserving the institutional status and hegemony of Roman Catholic elites.

The CBCP would eventually transition from a 'critically collaborative' organization committed primarily to grass-roots economic development and state-led communist containment to one vocally advocating for the protection and attainment of social justice and liberation, even if that meant criticizing the regime. This transition occurred at the point when the abuses of human rights and civil liberties by the regime became flagrant and increasingly violent. The crackdown on both foreign and local clergy who criticized the state and raids by the government on religious publications and institutions in the mid-1970s worked to unite the various elements within the Church in vocally opposing the regime (Youngblood 1978, p. 519). The active entanglement of the Church in matters of great social and political significance would escalate in the 1980s. The assassination of opposition senator Benigno Aquino Jr. in 1983 drastically shifted public opinion against Ferdinand Marcos to the extent that this would eventually lead to the latter's downfall.

Confronted with evidence of electoral fraud after the snap presidential elections of 1986, the CBCP issued the "Post-Election Statement" on 13 February 1986, in which they declared that "a government that assumes or retains power through fraudulent means

has no moral basis" (Rivera 2010, p. 91). Then CBCP President Ricardo Cardinal Vidal publicly enjoined all Filipinos: "Now is the time to speak up. Now is the time to repair the wrong. The wrong was systematically organized. So must its correction be" (Vidal 1986, p. 4). The People Power Revolution of 1986, a mass movement sparked by Cardinal Sin's radio broadcast urging people to protect defecting Marcos cabinet ministers, continues to be recognized as the prime example of direct intervention in political affairs by the Philippine Church.

The People Power Revolution was mass action against authoritarianism that literally had priests and nuns at the front line of civil resistance. Regime change might have been the immediate result of the political engagement by the Church. But this engagement, however, should be viewed in the context of the broader evangelical mission of the Church that had been reinvigorated by the Second Vatican Council. What Vatican II had enabled was an involvement in society that was political; not in the sense of direct partisanship, but rather in the endeavour of direct social engagement towards the end goal of human, material and spiritual upliftment. This engagement was itself seen as a constitutive element in preaching the Gospel in the Philippines. To remain apolitical—that is, to withdraw from the Church's advocacy of human rights—would mean shirking the evangelizing mission reiterated even more vehemently in the post-conciliar Church (Kroeger 1985, p. 20).

Timor-Leste: Emerging Democracy and the Indigenized Church

The vehement campaign to establish Timor-Leste as a province of Indonesia began in earnest in 1975 following the withdrawal of Portuguese colonial control and an ensuing civil war from which the Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente (FRETILIN) declared Timor-Leste's postcolonial independence. The Indonesian invasion was, in large part, motivated by fears that communist groups in an independent Timor-Leste could inspire separatist movements in other Indonesian provinces. Couched in terms of Cold War

dynamics, the Indonesian occupation received the tacit support of an international community (notably the governments of Australia, the United States, Japan, Malaysia and Canada) that feared Timor-Leste turning into an Asian Cuba (S. Philpott 2006, p. 137).

At the time of the Indonesian occupation, roughly twenty to thirty per cent of the population had been baptized into a Roman Catholic Church that acted largely as facilitators of the colonial government's policies, particularly in the provision of education. The Catholic Church at this time was comprised of a network of dioceses, parishes, chapels and schools concentrated mainly in coastal areas. The control of the education sector by the Church meant that teachings based on religious principles were influential in shaping the moral and aspirational identities of the East Timorese. Nevertheless, as historian Peter Carey writes, Catholic priests, mostly Portuguese, were largely aloof and even disdainful of the rural animist majority, and their ability to elicit genuine loyalty was "problematic at best" (Carey 1999, p. 80). The Church was perceived by the East Timorese as "integrated into Portugal's oppressive colonial structure and failing to support calls for self-determination. It never obtained genuine support from the majority of the population" (McGregor, Skeaff and Bevan 2012, p. 1132).

Following the Indonesian invasion, the campaigns by the Indonesian military (TNI) to subdue a steadily growing East Timorese resistance were devastating for the local population. Air and naval bombardments were followed by a destructive ground operation characterized as one of "encirclement and annihilation" (Taylor 1990, p. 85; see also Taylor 2003, pp. 166–67). In 1976, the Catholic Church in Timor-Leste reported estimates of the casualties as between 60,000 and 100,000 (cf. Dunn 1996, p. 310). The Church played a key role during this period of upheaval, primarily in trying to limit the ensuing damage and loss of life. However, the Portuguese-born head of the Church at that time, Bishop Riberiero, had interpreted FRETILIN's call for a separation of church and state as an indication of communist infiltration (Lundry 2002, p. 10). As Carey notes, "[i]n the 'pure democracy' which [FRETILIN] hoped to build in East

Timor there could be no place for a privileged colonial-style Church" (Carey 1999, p. 81). Following the colonial period, the Church in Timor-Leste was facing a foreign invading force that they had little influence, let alone control, over. As such, the initial policy of the Church in Timor-Leste, as was the case in the Philippines, was to adopt a calculated avoidance of expressing outright condemnation and criticism of the Indonesian government, maintaining instead an official policy of neutrality.

At the point of the Indonesian occupation, Church membership increased tremendously as a direct result of the Indonesian state's policy. The policy of Pancasila espoused a democratic ideal that President Suharto described as a 'socio-religious society' (quoted in G. Dwipayana and Ramadhan K.H. 1991, p. 194). The constitution on which it is based recognizes only six religions, including Roman Catholicism, and citizens are legally required to identify with one of these. Given that East Timorese animist belief systems did not correlate to Pancasila, it is hardly surprising, as scholars such as Peter Carey (1999, pp. 77–95) have argued, that most East Timorese had chosen to claim membership of Catholicism, which was the religion that had the highest level of familiarity and penetration. While it should be noted that the whole story of conversion cannot be explained by Pancasila alone, it is significant to note that by 1990 the proportion of baptized Catholics in Timor-Leste had risen to over ninety per cent (Hodge 2013, p. 153).

An indigenization of Church personnel followed the period of political transition as Portuguese clergy were mostly replaced by East Timorese clerics who were better able to disassociate themselves from the Church's colonial lineage. Unlike their Portuguese predecessors, however, Bishop Martinho da Costa Lopes and his eventual replacement, Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, were vociferous in their criticism of the Indonesian occupation and they brought the resistance to the attention of the international community (Wurfel 2004). As Lundry observed, following the Indonesian invasion in 1975, the Church was left as one of the few international institutions to keep in check the excesses of the Indonesian occupation such that it became

"the only tolerated public representation of civil society" (Lundry 2002, p. 2). The Church played an instrumental role in raising international awareness about the situation in Timor-Leste, in spite of pressure from the Indonesian government.

Meanwhile, Smythe (2004) discusses how Catholic dioceses in Indonesia sent priests to Timor-Leste to facilitate the replacement of the Latin and Portuguese used in Mass with Indonesian. For the most part, however, the Indonesian Church as an institution did not encourage vocal forms of protest or any kind of practical advocacy against the occupation (Smythe 2004, p. 79). To be sure, this reticence should be contextualized upon the Indonesian Church's own struggle for legitimacy as a minority faith in a Muslim-dominated country. While Indonesian clergy and personnel observed the injustices perpetuated by the TNI, such observations were tempered with calls for prudence in openly criticizing the occupation (Smythe 2004, p. 78). In effect, the dioceses in Indonesia were "for the most part agents of their government's policy (albeit generally with good will and intentions)" (Smythe 2004, p. 78). In addition to its silence, the Indonesian Church was complicit in propagating pre-existing anxieties over communist elements among the East Timorese Independence movement. In this sense, the complicity of the Indonesian Church, or at least its failure to agitate against the regime, resembled the situation of churches in the Philippines and Africa, where "the preservation of the social and political hegemony of religious leaders required that they support existing regimes" (Anderson 2007, p. 388).

The isolation felt by the East Timorese Church was compounded by the Vatican's reluctance to openly declare full support for the plight of the East Timorese resistance. According to Peter Carey (1999, p. 82), citing Archer, the wider Church failed to "state openly and officially their solidarity with the Church, people and religious of Timor-Leste". The lack of explicit support from Catholics did in fact constitute what East Timorese clerics called "the heaviest blow" to their struggle for independence (Smythe 2004, p. 42).

The Vatican did offer indirect support for the East Timorese cause. The appointment of da Costa Lopes as apostolic administrator

instead of bishop effectively placed the Diocese of Dili under the jurisdiction of the Vatican. As Rowena Lennox points out, Timor-Leste was treated as a separate ecclesiastical entity rather than included in the Indonesian or Portuguese bishops conferences (Lennox 2000, pp. 134–35).

Facilitating an institutional separation between the East Timorese Catholic Church and the Indonesian Bishop's Conference (IBC) would empower local clerics to more effectively circumvent the reluctance by the Indonesian Church to engage (Archer 1995, pp. 126–27). In this sense the Vatican had (albeit indirectly) contributed to the East Timorese Church acting as a major challenge to Indonesia's attempts to integrate Timor-Leste (Smythe 2004, p. 184).

The rapid expansion and indigenization of the East Timorese Church was particularly significant in the post-Vatican II context, in which the positive social role of the clergy was greatly emphasized. With the reticent attitude of both the Indonesian Church and the Vatican during the early years of the occupation, it was left largely to the East Timorese priests to take on an increasingly active role in being more socially and politically engaged with the East Timorese resistance (Lundry 2002, p. 8). Vatican II had recognized that the Church could no longer be thought of as a specifically European institution and, as such, theological and evangelical agendas must be aligned towards culturally appropriate interpretations and implementations of Church doctrine.

Father Domingos, who was involved in the struggle for independence and the nation-building process in Timor-Leste, personified the post-conciliar approach by the Church. In September 1998 he was a participant in the First East Timorese National Convention held in Peniche, Portugal involving some two hundred East Timorese, many of whom were members of political parties. Along with Father Filomeno Jacob and Father Francisco Bareto, Father Domingos participated in the convention as the representative of resistance leader Xanana Gusmão, who was in prison in Jakarta at the time. Held with the support of the Portuguese government, the meeting resulted in the creation of the Conselho Nacional da

Resistência Timorense (National Council of Timorese Resistance, or CNRT), which was an entity that brought together a broad spectrum of activists in resisting Indonesian occupation.

The CNRT strengthened the East Timorese struggle for independence in at least two ways: first by openly welcoming East Timorese who had previously collaborated with Indonesia as allies in a new era of state formation, and second by acknowledging the crucial role of the Church in the resistance against the Indonesian occupation (Lipscomb 2019, p. 86). These two ideals were manifested in the drafting of the *Magna Carta Concerning Freedoms, Rights, Duties and Guarantees for the People of East Timor* (2000), a document that presented a skeletal vision of how an East Timorese nation, government and society might be configured along liberal democratic principles. A crucial factor in this aspiration was the unification of East Timorese political groups, which was identified as the prerequisite for a viable diplomatic strategy for Timor-Leste in the international arena (Sahin 2015, p. 118).

In promulgating this vision of society, Father Domingos recalled to me the importance he placed in representing not only Gusmão but also the religious identity of the East Timorese *povo* (people). Certainly, it was important for him that the Magna Carta contained clauses that endorsed the commitment by the state to the protection of democratic rights and the promotion of peace and disarmament. For Father Domingos, it was equally important that the document distinguished Timor-Leste's religious identity as crucial in the resistance to Indonesian attempts at forced assimilation. As such, the Peniche Magna Carta is explicit about the importance of being "[m]indful of our historical, cultural, spiritual and religious heritage and of a cultural identity that is rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition" (Tanter, Selden and Shalom 2000, p. 117). The human rights activist and author Pat Walsh had likened the Magna Carta to a sacred document: "Like the Covenant of old, the CNRT Magna Carta is what its title says it is, namely a great undertaking, a solemn and sacred commitment" (Walsh 2011, p. 98). The Peniche convention, then, was not just a unification of various political parties. It was a

gathering that established the moral and ethical framework for the Church's mandate of political critique, particularly against communist infiltration.

Like his counterparts in the Philippines, most notably Cardinals Rosales and Sin, Bishop Belo insisted that the role of the Church in the political sphere must be inspired by guidelines prescribed by Vatican II. Aside from *Gaudium et Spes*, which he draws from consistently, two references to Church documents stand out. First, his statements acknowledge Pope Paul VI's 1967 *Populorum Progressio* (Development of Peoples), which emphasized that engagement with political institutions by the Church should be predicated upon its mandate of prioritizing 'authentic human development' (Paul VI 1967). In contextualizing the political agency of the Church, Belo has cited Pope John Paul II's 1988 Apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, a document that stipulated that the faithful should maintain active participation in those economic, legislative and administrative areas of social life with the intention of promoting the common good (John Paul II 1988).

Inspired by Belo, Father Domingos himself embodied this post-conciliar mandate in his continued efforts to critique the post-occupation government. He pointed out that the East Timorese political leaders and freedom fighters, who included Jose Ramos Horta, Nicolau Lobatau and Mari Alkatiri, had all gone to his alma mater—the Jesuit Seminary at Dare in Dili. Their educational background in the seminary, which included social justice ideals promulgated in Vatican II, had encouraged them to integrate the Church fully in the process of nation-building and of governance. In this vein he saw it as his mandate to be vigilant and vocal about the performance and integrity of government officials, even if this carried the risk of being accused of political interference. Responding to the claim by the government that the Church was seeking political influence, he wrote (cited in da Silva 2008, pp. 11–12):

> The Catholic Church will always be on the side of the christened in all of Timor, rising up and crying out that the government does not become a bad payer. To the veterans, the poor and widows

> who lived the war and truly suffered from it, independence has come and there is no consideration! This is a grave burden, and the Church fulfils its moral responsibility to be on the side of those baptized by [im]posing checks on the bad payer. (Leach 2017, pp. 159–60; cf. da Silva 2008)

As was the case among the Roman Catholic clergy in the Philippines in the late 1970s and 1980s, the containment of communism was a crucial factor that necessitated a role of the Church as moral and political vanguard. Father Domingos is quoted in the newspaper *Daily Berita* on 25 April 2005 saying that "[FRETILIN] are ultra-left with strong communist tendencies.… Those people who had defected to Mozambique where dictatorial governments continued are dominant.… In order to put an end to an ultra-left government, the residents and the Catholic Church joined peaceful demonstrations. I would like to demand for the resignation of the government and ask the Fretilin to select a new leader" (cf. Yamada 2010, p. 32). Scholars such as Alynna Lyon have described the role of the East Timorese Church in public life as that of a "political entrepreneur: gathering resources, organizing protest rallies or social movements, or actively campaigning for parties or candidates" (Lyon 2013, p. 77).

Father Domingos considered his involvement in CNRT and his subsequent critique of the government and communist elements within as channelling the spirit of *Gaudium et Spes* when he described his actions as not political but rather as part of a commitment to defend human dignity, as reiterated in Vatican II. Far from emphasizing technocratic competency as a politician, he saw his role as imbuing the political cause with a robust moral dimension. This involved interacting closely with those in the resistance whose duty it was to forge an independent democratic nation, and remaining vigilant of government excess or incompetence. He believed he embodied the role of the East Timorese Church of maintaining the ethical and moral foundations of the nation itself.

Conclusion

In this essay I have not sought to dispel the Catholic wave thesis outright but rather to temper its central claims by providing (1) a sense

of the theological nuance with respect to the process in which Roman Catholic agents contributed to the diffusion of democratic ideals, particularly those of human rights and sociopolitical development, and (2) local perspectives on the process by which post-conciliar reforms were 'received' in Catholic-majority countries in Southeast Asia, particularly in light of the devolution of the Latin rite and the empowerment of ecclesial configurations at the regional and national levels. What the varying diocesan, national and regional configurations that emerged from Vatican II demonstrate is that the sense of context specificity that comes from considering these two themes is crucial in evaluating the methods by which regional churches engage with politics (Himes 2006, p. 20).

For the first objective, a closer reading of official Vatican II documents encourages the application of conceptual nuance to the notion that the Church had declared a direct endorsement of a particular democratic model. To be sure, the council did inspire a reorientation towards the political realm, and in particular the fostering of a relatively more positive attitude towards democracy as a political form when considered in the context of the traditional reluctance on the part of the Church to accept democracy.[2] The emphasis here, however, has been on how the pastoral-theological strategies promulgated in the council encouraged a particular kind of institutional self-understanding—one that included a vision of intervention by the Church in the political sphere as coterminous with the pastoral emphasis on the "humanum" (Kroeger 1987, p. 4). I consider the post-Vatican II adoption by the Church of 'signs of the times' as a mode of discernment-action that emboldened particular forms of political agency. That is to say that the council, through its declarations of the sacred dignity of the human person, provided a theological basis by which clerical agents could rationalize and actualize their confrontation with the challenges of democratic transition in their respective countries.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Roman Catholic clergy in Southeast Asia found inspiration in Vatican II in engaging in promoting human rights and social and economic justice. More progressive strains of these efforts took shape in the Philippines, as in Latin America, in

the form of Asian variants of liberation theology (Wielenga 2007). But for many priests in Timor-Leste, particularly those who found themselves in close proximity to resistance fighters, the main concern was simply ensuring the safety and security of their parishioners. At the national level, as Anderson observed, Church involvement "took the form of religious hierarchies promoting the new understanding of human dignity, which would appear to preclude government use of torture, disappearance and murder" (2007, p. 385).

For the second objective, I have shown that an understanding of political engagement by the Church must also be made in the context of the devolution of the Church network, manifested in particular by the efforts of Catholic Churches in Asia to adopt conciliar teachings to sociopolitical realities specific to the Asian experience. In an Asian context, the goal of embodying the spirit of post-conciliar Church reform lies in local churches embarking upon a threefold 'reception' (in the sense used by Phan) with traditional culture, other faiths and poverty. It is in this context that we might better frame the experience of the Church in the Philippines and Timor-Leste.

The Church institutions in both countries were engaging with state regimes that sought to mitigate the rise of communism. The Second Vatican Council had made only implicit denouncements of the negative influence of communist ideology on the practice of the Christian faith. The complicity of local Indonesian and Filipino Churches with government policies was premised largely on an in-principle support for the state's policies of leftist containment. Significantly, this also meant that the Church institutions sought to keep in check progressive positions within its ranks. In both Indonesian and Philippine churches in the 1970s and 1980s, conservative anti-communist clerical factions came to dominate official church positions, including concerted efforts to mitigate any form of ideological co-optation of the clergy. Nevertheless, in both the Philippines and Timor-Leste, political intervention was premised upon the clergy's critical engagement and direct embeddedness in the sociopolitical and economic conditions of their flock, particularly in rural communities. In this way, although it was not always explicitly

stated, local churches were promulgating pastoral methods that were a central feature of both Latin American and Asian variants of liberation theology in their confrontation with colonial, postcolonial and authoritarian state power.

The initial reluctance of Church institutions in both democracies to engage in outright confrontation with the state gradually shifted to explicit activism against the latter. In the Philippines it was the attacks on Church personnel and property and the assassination of Benigno Aquino Jr. in 1983. For Timor-Leste it was the atrocities of the Indonesian military, which reached such devastating proportions that prominent Church leaders found it necessary to abandon their initially reserved policy in favour of more explicit forms of activism.

As Church leaders in Southeast Asia move towards more outright forms of political engagement in the contemporary period, it is important to underscore that the confluence between Catholicism and democratization is not a historical artefact limited to a specific time period. The current economic and political uncertainties in the Philippines and Timor-Leste challenge the Catholic Church and its agents in new ways. It can be argued, as I and other scholars have done (Bautista 2018; Cornelio and Medina 2019), that the Philippines has never in its history been subjected to such hostility from the state—including the anticlericalism it faced towards the end of the Spanish colonial era, and the repression of the martial law period. In Timor-Leste, similarly, the Church there continues to face formidable challenges (see Feijó 2018 and Leach 2018) as its leaders seek to establish its political infrastructure under the constraints of various geopolitical challenges both internal and external.

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NOTES

1. Tacit support for democratic models must be viewed against the backdrop of efforts by the Church to condemn communist ideology as antithetical to

its mission. Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, for example, was relatively explicit in condemning communism: "We are driven to repudiate such ideologies as deny God and oppress the Church", he wrote. "These ideologies are often identified with economic, social and political regimes; atheistic communism is a glaring instance of this" (Green 2013). However, what eventually came through in the Church document *Gaudium et Spes* was only a timid rebuke of atheism, supplanted by oblique references to previous condemnations to communism by former pontiffs.

2. Troy (2009) offers some context to the historical opposition by the Church to democracy. "Historically, the church was certainly one, if not the main actor opposing the modern sovereign territorial nation state, as it emerged after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. This is mainly because the church itself dominated social life in much of Europe at that time, as an actor as well as a structure, perceiving the unity of the Respublica Christiana ('Christian Republic') in danger as the Peace of Westphalia replaced [religious] unity with segmentation" (Troy 2009, p. 1095).

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