

*The Position of the Catholic Church in Political and Social Relations of the Philippines*

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## Introduction

The Catholic Church today holds great influence in legal and social matters of the Philippines. Through the spreading of religious beliefs it has gained faith from 85 percent of the Filipino population and uses this to exert power in encouraging the word of God. After a history of the establishment of Catholicism in the nation, this paper will explain how the Catholic Church exerts influence over the national government and personal lives of the citizens. It continues to have a say in political decisions such as the recent issue of reproductive health and such institutions as marriage and divorce. The profound influence the Church has on the State is evident in the creation of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. All of these examples create an image of the Catholic Church as a powerful, convincing institution that has apprehended the minds of the majority of the Filipino population. As it will become evident, the duty of the State *and* the Church is to “respect, protect, and fulfill” (CESCR, 2000).

## History of Religion in the Philippines

Prior to colonization by the Spanish in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, religion in the Philippines was composed of indigenous rituals including sacrifices and prayers to the natural spirits (Miller, 1982). The most powerful of the gods was Bathala, who created Earth and man. In the afterlife, behavior from the present life determined reward or punishment. Some people were believed to have power over the supernatural and were given prominence in society. The society created by this was one with the utmost connection to nature.

The emergence of Islam in the Philippines had already begun by the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century as it rose from Indonesia. Continuous contact with merchants from abroad resulted in the firm establishment of Islam in Mindanao and Sulu as well as some recognition in Cebu and Luzon. Upon the arrival of the Spanish and their imposition of Catholicism, Islam became dominant in only a secluded region of the nation.

Lead by Miguel Lopez de Legaspi, the Spanish arrived in the Philippines in 1565 and quickly

established settlements and political unity so as to have full control over the colonized peoples. The rapid implementation of Christianity began as the widespread Muslims were limited to the region of Mindanao and Sulu. Though the Spanish were able to maintain the Islamic region, they were never able to dominate them, which is the cause of religious strife between the Christians and Muslims today.

Spain was able to exert power and convert the majority of the Filipino population to practice Roman Catholicism. The newly christened Filipinos were protected from influence of the Muslims within established *pueblos*, or communities, which revolved around church meetings and traditional religious ceremonies of the Christian faith. Local economies were established but still protected from outsiders by the Spanish rule.

Since the Philippines was considered a colony of Spain, the Cadiz Constitution of Spain also became the effective constitution of the Philippines upon its implementation in Manila in 1813 (School of History, 2003). Under this Constitution, two Philippine delegates were selected and sworn into office. Following war in Europe, the Cadiz Constitution was rejected by new Spanish authority and the Philippine representation in politics was abolished.

British rule began in 1762 with the occupation of Manila upon the defeat of local Spanish forces. Under British control, the Spanish demanded the maintenance of the Roman Catholic religion and its episcopal government. This period brought some prosperity to the Filipino people in the agricultural sector but ended in 1764 without establishing any long lasting benefits.

The Spanish colonization of the Philippines established Catholicism as the religion of the majority and emphasized its importance through political power. Even when American forces gained control and imposed Protestant denominations of Christianity, the influence of Catholicism outlasted the American occupation.

Though American religion was not very influential, American political methods were successful in that they created a constitution for the Philippines in 1935. Article Three of this Constitution denoted the Bill of Rights and included the people's rights to religion:

*Art. III, Sec. 1.7* No law shall be made respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, and the free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship, without discrimination or preference, shall forever be allowed. No religious test shall be required for the exercise of civil or political rights.

Article Six further established standards of government spending in regards to supporting any religious establishments:

*Art. VI, Sec. 23.3* No public money, or property shall ever be appropriated, applied, or used, directly or indirectly, for the use, benefit, or support of any sect, church, denomination, sectarian institution or system of religion, for the use, benefit, or support of any priest, preacher, ministers, or other religious teacher or dignitary as such except when such priest, preacher, minister, or dignitary is assigned to the armed forces or to any penal institution, orphanage or leprosarium.

These decrees establish freedom of religion without required worship or commitment of any kind. They also establish separation of church and state by forbidding any admittance of religious affiliation when initiated into political employment. This mimics the Constitution of the United States in the attempt to create a democratic nation.

In 1945, during the Japanese Occupation of the Philippines, an alternate constitution was written. The reference in Article Three of the 1935 Constitution was replaced by the portion from Article Six. In Article Seven pertaining to the Duties and Rights of the Citizen, the following statement was made:

*Art. VII, Sec. 3* No law shall be made respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, and no religious test shall be required for the exercise of civil or political rights.

This decree does not suggest that there will be no future implications hindering the freedom of religion or any discrimination based on choice of religion. At this stage, the nation retreated one step in the free exercise of religion.

During the reign of Ferdinand Marcos martial law was established in 1972 and subsequently a

new constitution was drafted the following year. In the 1973 Constitution, the reference to religion drafted in Article Three of the 1935 Constitution was restored. The second reference which was maintained in the 1945 Constitution also remained effective in law. From these comparisons, it would appear that the separation of church and state remained throughout these changes in leadership.

In drafting the Constitution of 1987 that is still in use today, the statement involving religion in Article Six of the 1935 Constitution was subtly altered. The original statement was as follows:

No public money, or property shall ever be appropriated, applied, or used, directly or indirectly, for the use, benefit, or support of any sect, church, denomination, sectarian institution or system of religion...

The revision to this portion was made to be the following:

No public money or property shall be appropriated, applied, *paid, or employed*, directly or indirectly, for the use, benefit, or support of any sect, church, denomination, sectarian institution, or system of religion...

This revision scratches the key word *used*, in a way that could further support the funding of the Catholic Church by the national government. The change observed here is the door to corrupt practices and political revolution by the Church.

The current Constitution of the Philippines made effective in 1987 is more vulnerable to influence from the Catholic Church in the form of advocacy, rather than direct law making (Rivas, 2008). The Church has been successful in providing support to push social reform agenda, despite reminders from the Vatican of the widely acknowledged separation of church and state.

### **The Catholic Church and Politics**

The Catholic Church continues to have influence in regard to social agenda. It is not necessarily always in support of the government, but it maintains leverage in relevant issues. A recent example of this is its support for farmers who urged for the ownership of land they possessed. After twenty years of deliberation, assistance from the Church persuaded the government to sign over the land from the

corporations to the tenants (Rivas). In defense of the Church's actions, this can be justified as an act of “Christian social reform,” which enables the Church to assume the responsibility of enforcing humane conditions of life and work.”

Throughout the Marcos dictatorship, the Catholic Church and the government were in disagreement. With the rise of the People Power Revolution, the Church was in full support of the new movement. Supporting the word of Archbishop Jaime Cardinal Sin, the Church urged the Filipino people into a mass demonstration of 50,000 people in which members of the Church lead constant prayers for support from God in the dire times that lay ahead (Calandria, 2011). This movement organized by the Church became the lasting memory of the successful Revolution.

With President Corazon Aquino in control, influential members of the Church were recruited to assist in drafting the new Constitution. The ability of the public to witness this collaboration affirmed the status of the Church alongside the government.

In reminiscence of the People Power Revolution, Cardinal Sin again took initiative in politics to persuade President Joseph Estrada to step down from office. He was further backed by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, which strengthened his word and the power of persuasion from the Church.

In addition to having influence over the Filipino people in support for the government, the Church is influential in some aspects of law. In having control over beliefs that guide life actions, the minds of leaders are persuaded to establish laws coinciding with the beliefs of the Catholic Church. The most relevant of these that raise controversy with non-Catholic nations are divorce and reproductive health.

### *The Church and Divorce*

Some nations such as the Philippines that have established organizations of Catholic faith are not granted the permission of obtaining divorce in marriage. The following is an excerpt from The Family Code, which is contained in The Civil Code of the Philippines.

*Art. XV, Sec. 2* Marriage is a special contract of permanent union between a man and a woman entered into in accordance with law for the establishment of conjugal and family life. It is the foundation of the family and an inviolable institution whose nature, consequences, and incidents are governed by law and not subject to stipulation, except that marriage may fix the property relations during the marriage within the limits provided by this Code.

This statement of law is a more detailed discussion of the Constitutional decree referring to marriage. The *inviolability* of the marriage contract makes divorce legal in no way; only annulments may be pursued to declare marriages void. The consequences and incidents that may occur within marriages are here defined as irresolute and not the responsibilities of the State. Such incidents could take the forms of physical abuse, infidelity, and abandonment (for a certain period of time) among others. Even when marriages reach these stages of what is sensibly nonexistence, the involved parties can only resort to legal separation. Annulments are only granted upon proof of the following grounds: one party was a minority without consent at the time of marriage; lack of authority of a solemnizing officer; absence of a marriage license; bigamous or polygamous marriages; mistake in identity; failure to register the marriage; incestuous marriages; void by public policy; and psychological incapacity.

The above criteria for the annulment of marriages are very limiting. They do not take into account the fact of reality that relationships frequently end. Even a mutual agreement between parties bound by marriage cannot dissolve the status of marriage in the State. The established marriage is protected by the State from dissolution but those parties who suffer physically and emotionally in the relationship are not granted freedom from their legal contracts. This itself is a discriminatory act that preserves the reputation of the State and the beliefs of the Catholic Church while it denies humans their natural right to happiness and protection in life.

### ***The Church and Reproductive Health***

There is no doubt that the population of the Philippines has continuously grown at an alarming

rate for the past several decades. In 2000, this rate was 2.36 percent; over the past ten years it has dropped to an estimated 1.90 percent. As of now the Philippines is ranked 60<sup>th</sup> among the world's population growth rates. In 2000 nearby Malaysia had a growth rate of 1.9% while the rate equal in both Thailand and Singapore was only 0.8 percent (Collymore, 2003). This is proof that there is some error in policy or societal structures that allows such a growth rate that is so detrimental to society.

The most widely demanded resolution or predicted decelerator is the widespread availability of contraceptives. Between 1995 and 2008, the rate of intended pregnancies declined from 92 to 78 percent. The availability of contraceptives would largely decrease the incidence of unwanted pregnancies and births and would lessen the prevalent burden on society by lessening the demands of money, labor, food, and other goods that are scarce in the poverty-stricken areas.

The relevance of the Catholic Church in the issue of reproductive health begins with the prohibition of abortion. This is a widely controversial practice that is frequently influenced by the Church and other religious organizations. The resulting problem with prohibiting abortion in a country where such a population problem exists is that women who experience unwanted pregnancies sometimes resort to risky procedures that are dangerous to their health and warrant legal punishment if caught. To make matters worse, religious beliefs imposed by the Church make women feel guilt-ridden for the *sins* of having abortions (Guttmacher Institute, 2009).

Pregnancy poses health risks in itself when women do not seek prenatal care. Oftentimes women in poverty do not have funds or access to health care to ensure the health status of their pregnancies. In some cases, children are born with health problems that exacerbate the costs of supporting them, which also inhibit them with lifelong handicaps.

The Catholic Church establishes a society that is unable to control its growth rates based on law and religious faith. It claims that the Filipino culture values having large families, but in reality large families are the result of inaccessible methods of family planning. If the suffering portion of the population had reliable, easy access to contraceptives, the growth rate would decline and there would

be a lesser burden on poverty.

Below are portions of the 1987 Constitution that refer to the institution of family:

*Art. XV, Sec. 1* The State recognizes the Filipino family as the foundation of the nation;

*Art. XV, Sec. 3.1* The State shall defend the right of spouses to found a family in accordance with their religious conviction and the demands of responsible parenthood.

*Art. XV, Sec. 3.3* The right of the family to a family living wage and income;

*Art. XV, Sec. 3.4* The right of families or family associations to participate in the planning and implementation of policies and programs that affect them.

As evident in these excerpts, the State guarantees families *the right* to earn an income that is enough to support their entire families. This provides no supportive measures from the State, however, and it becomes limited for families with many children. Filipinos in poverty are denied their right to efficiently provide for their families when they have no control over family size. Additionally, they are denied their right as stated above to participate in the planning of policies and programs that affect them. This is equivalent to their right to reproductive health care and contraceptives; although perhaps they are not technically denied the right to these resources if they don't exist to begin with.

The statement regarding religious conviction and responsible parenthood is most important. The Church defends this statement in the rights of families without contraceptives and other reproductive health resources. The Filipino families in poverty, however, are not aiming to have large families in the worship of God, nor are they exercising responsible parenthood in having more children than for which they can provide.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines made arguments throughout the processing of the most recent Reproductive Health Bill. One of its claims made to deny the Bill was that contraceptives provide “safe and satisfying sex” (Odchimar, 2010.2). Additional facts that are provided refer to the failure of contraceptives in the presence of sexually transmitted diseases, the carcinogenic element of contraceptives, and the liberal aspect of sex education programs. While these may or may

not be true, the statistics from sex education studies are very informative. There is proof that students who have experienced sex education courses will make better decisions in engaging in sexual activity. They will be more knowledgeable and informed to make the best personal decisions, rather than without that knowledge that will more likely dissuade them. Furthermore, the use of contraceptives is not to the disadvantage of anyone; they may fail at times but they rarely cause any harm. Sex education either reduces rates of sexual activity worldwide or maintains them, it does not cause these rates to increase. With contraceptives available there will be more protective measures in use and less risk of such related diseases and/or pregnancies.

Introduced into the Fifteenth Congress was House Bill No. 101, which was an effort to establish reproductive health care for women (Gamir, 2010). It states that

the right to reproductive health care is protected under the international human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Women's Convention, the International Conference on Population and Development Program of Action, and the Fourth World Conference on Women Platform for Action, among others.

This Bill brings to light the realities of problems such as maternal mortality, family planning implementation, abortion incidence, adolescent and youth health, access to information on reproductive health, and prevalence of HIV and AIDS. It also reiterates that the Philippine government is responsible for providing access and availability of these resources. This Bill contains the following in its Declaration of Principles:

*Sec. 2* The State recognizes and guarantees the human rights of all persons including the right to equality and equity, the right to sustainable human development, the right to health which includes reproductive health, the right to education and information and the right to choose and make decisions for themselves in accordance with their religious convictions, cultural beliefs, and the demands of responsible parenthood.

The success of the most recent Reproductive Health Bill was the result of constant deliberations

of the poverty situation and increasing population. At the current growth rates, the population would be increased by 82 percent by the year 2050 (Collymore). This fact and the increasing strains on resources convinced the government to pass the Bill.

The Bill also contains the following:

*Sec. 2* The State shall guarantee universal access to information and education, and safe, affordable, and quality reproductive health care services.

The State likewise guarantees universal access to medically safe, legal, affordable and quality reproductive health care services, methods, devices, supplies and relevant information thereon...

These two statements encompass the largest issues of the Bill. As a result, in due time women will be able to receive much needed medical care during pregnancy, information, education, and supplies for further family planning.

The overriding theme of the Church in this battle was the immorality of the Bill and how it would allegedly putrefy society. The fact is that the Church was merely defending its own stance in the situation. Rather than eliminating the “God-fearing” mindset of society that they claim, it would lessen the influence that they hold in decisive matters in the future (Odchimar, 2010.1).

The Church made the statement that contraceptives would not solve the problem of poverty. This is indeed true, but it will help alleviate the excessive pressure on families that cannot earn enough to support their growing families. It also may not reduce poverty, but it may decrease the rate at which poverty increases. In slowing the effects of growing populations in poverty, the Reproductive Health Bill became the turning point in legislation that proves the separation of Church and State. Despite this loss, the Church is not dissuaded in other aspects of politics because it still holds reasonable leverage and exerts power in the economic sphere of the nation.

### **Influence of the Church on Societal and Economic Relationships**

The Catholic Church continues to influence society's structures and economic interactions. Its relevance in society as created what could be considered an egalitarian society that exerts a hierarchical

social structure (Strieborny, 2011). Accordingly, this social structure includes greater social inequalities than those countries with laissez-faire societies. As a result, greater disparities are created in the economic sector.

A relevant observation of studies involving religion and economics is that those people who are deeply religious are more trustful (Guiso, Sapienza, & Zingales, 2002). This means that they would have greater trust in their government and likewise in the Church. Because of this trust from the people, the Church is able to exert greater influence in economic activities of the nation.

The Catholic Church as a whole exhibits more competitive economic traits and emphasizes privatization. Studies show that the support from Catholics for private ownership is twice that from Protestants (Guiso, et al., 2002). It was in this way that the Church was able to gain some control early in the reproductive health debate. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women observed that States were already transferring these functions to private agencies as of 1999 (CEDAW, 1999). As a result, reproductive health services were accessible less frequently for women.

Increased privatization thus limits the opportunities of consumers and increases the income gaps between social classes. Increased competition also adds to these disparities because it is harder for the poor to compete with the wealthy. Furthermore, “religious people of all denominations are more inclined to believe that poor people are lazy and lack will power,” so except from the small population of the Philippines that is non-religious there is little support for the poor (Guiso, et al.). The strength of the Church in economic matters is far from diminishing because the faith from the people is so great.

### **The Church versus Islam**

As mentioned earlier, the Spanish conquest to establish Catholicism in the Philippines faced immediate opposition from the partially established Muslim regions. Four centuries later, this situation of conflicting religions has yet to change (Gowing, 1978).

The conflicts between the Muslim separatist groups and the rest of the Christian nation have claimed more than 120,000 lives in the past three decades (Asia Foundation, 2007). Due to the obvious

religious differences, the Muslims have faced large amounts of discrimination from the Catholic majority and the national government that is influenced by the Catholic Church (Bureau of Democracy, 2004). Persisting conflicts through the years of the Marcos dictatorship and years after resulted in Republic Act No. 6734 in August of 1989, which declared the creation of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

Though there is no declared state religion, it is obvious that some support remains in the State from the Catholic Church; otherwise there would not be such conflicts from Muslim groups. Clearly some of their rights to religious freedoms have been denied and therefore they continue their efforts to establish an independent Islamic State. Such stresses occur in the socioeconomic relations of the population that discriminate against the Muslim peoples.

The establishment of the Autonomous Region is in acknowledgment of close relations between the Church and State. If this were not silently accepted as the situation, the establishment of a region based on its religion and therefore granting it autonomous action under a religious local government would have been denied. Neither does this granted region exercise without influence from the dominant local religion, so it is at greater risk of further conflict with the national government because of religious differences.

All encounters in the Autonomous Region, however, do not induce conflicts. Muslim students frequently attend Christian schools because of lacking educational structures established for the Muslim population (Bureau of Democracy). The Catholic institutions are democratic in these cases in that the Muslim students in these schools are not required to receive Christian religious instruction.

Though there is cooperation between Catholics and Muslims in the Autonomous Region, there is still conflict as a result of discrimination. The socioeconomic disadvantages of the Muslims do not allow them to establish sufficient institutions for education and other important social structures. The quality of schools often does not reach the accreditation standards of the national Department of Education (Bureau of Democracy). Conflicts over natural resources lead to confrontations with local

Christian groups and the national government (Asia Foundation).

The fact remains that conflicts with Muslims in Mindanao and other regions of the nation will not disappear until there is less influence from the Catholic Church in national proceedings. Statements of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines exhibit the efforts toward actions of reconciliation and peace, but as of yet no agreements have been reached (Quevedo, 2000). Nations such as the United States do not endure these conflicts because the national government does not allow any religious organizations to provide input in government decisions as does the Catholic Church in the Philippines. Complete separation of Church and State does not allow the creation of autonomous regions based on religion, nor does it allow discrimination based on religion within social and economic relations. The plight of the Muslims is the direct result of a dominant religion that provides guidance to the nation through policy and propaganda.

### **Conclusion**

As a worldwide organization, the Catholic Church has influence on actions regardless of political affiliation or lack thereof. It provided strength in aiding the collapse of communism and continues to try and influence policies imposed by governments worldwide (Rivas). The dogmatic element of religion is the pushing strength that allows the Church to influence nations. As we witness the holy wars that exist today, the relevance of religion in politics cannot be denied. Its influence is inevitable and will cause continued conflict for generations to come.

Action by the Catholic Church is not always directly aimed at national governments. In the democratization of the United States, it is difficult for the Vatican to exercise power at the very top of politics. For this reason, from the start of America's independence until 1960 the interests of the Church were deliberated upon the local and state systems (Mumford, 1996). This was a more direct way to contact the people and more effective in mobilizing support. The worldwide actions of the Roman Catholic Church remain unscrupulous in nature and continue to exert power in political institutions. It is indirect in that often the aim is to mobilize the people for movement apart from the government, yet

it is effective. As Rivas states, “it believes that, by its own right, it is capable of negotiating with the world.”

Rivas claims that the Catholic Church is headed for a destructive path along which it will lose the power of influence that it holds today. “By arguing for moral theology, some members of the clergy risk the future of the church in terms of exposing the ambivalence of the separate nature of the church vis-à-vis the state.” In other words, it is no longer trying to exert such influence in the political sphere and consequently will lose any influence it has with the people. To the contrary, however, as one bishop claims, “The Church is the soul of the nation,” so it will not lose its power anytime soon.

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