

Philippines: The costs to the Church

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Although the Church draws its mandate from God, it remains very much a human institution. Its leaders are human beings like the rest of us, subject to the same desires and temptations that besiege ordinary mortals. Its structures likewise mirror the characteristics of the society in which it operates. But, as a religious institution, the Church offers a vision that transcends the world of the here and now. It prescribes a mode of living based on faith that is different from, and at times opposed to, what is common or conventional. Herein resides its distinct societal role. This role is what is undermined when its leaders act like ordinary politicians or businessmen, seeking power or peddling influence, or trading for profit.

No one could have defined this role better for the Catholic Church than its present pope, Benedict XVI. He said: "The Church is an advocate of justice and of the poor, precisely because she does not identify with politicians or with partisan interests. Only by remaining independent can she teach the great criteria and inalienable values, guide consciences and offer a life choice that goes beyond the political sphere. To form consciences, to be the advocate of justice and truth, to educate in individual and political virtues: that is the fundamental vocation of the Church in this area." (Opening address to the 5th General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, May 13, 2007)

The Church would have a problem fulfilling this vocation unless it can command moral authority. The burden of maintaining that authority rests with all its members, but obviously it falls heaviest on its clergy. They are the models of the "life choice" that Benedict talks about, the living examples of what it means to be a human being who chooses to live as Jesus Christ showed and taught.

A priest who becomes a regular fixture in cockpits, for instance, has no business talking about the evils of gambling. Bishops and priests who routinely take money from gambling lords and contributions from state gambling agencies cannot expect to be taken seriously when they rail against the immorality of gambling. Bishops, who have no compunction about asking for a birthday gift from a president, or from any politician for that matter, lose not just their self-respect but also their independence. And, worse, if they pledge their unwavering support to their benefactor in return, they thereby transform the Church they represent into "a directly political subject." Their actions and pronouncements on crucial issues henceforth become suspect.

One only has to look at the advocacies of the Catholic Church in the Philippines to realize what it gives up when its moral authority is under fire. Apart from its crusade against gambling—a component of its campaign to protect the poor—the Church has been active in at least three other areas. These are: agrarian reform, human rights and reproductive health.

The struggle for agrarian reform and human rights has long been the linchpin of the Philippine Church's social justice agenda. It is what radicalized members of the religious community during the years of the dictatorship, driving many priests, nuns and seminarians to take up overtly political roles in the underground movement. The collapse of the dictatorship and the advent of the Cory presidency substantially muted this struggle. A property-owning Church that maintained a cozy relationship with the landed elite somehow could not summon the same passion that had fueled the

activism of its young clergy. Similarly, a Church that shielded its own priests accused of sexually abusing children from prosecution became wary about criticizing a military that protected human rights violators within its ranks. More than this, it made it difficult for the Church to be taken seriously when it preached the ethics of sexuality.

This crisis of credibility unavoidably spills over to other issues in which the Church has waged a critical battle—not the least of which is the campaign against artificial contraception. Here, public opinion is at least divided, and the Church is aware that it faces an uphill battle. In contrast to the active support that the Church got from former President Gloria Arroyo, it must now contend with an administration that has explicitly taken a position in favor of promoting responsible parenthood, including the use of artificial contraceptives. Rather than seek a common ground in which public policy might be reconciled with moral doctrine, some key leaders of the Church have taken an antagonistic stance towards the presidency of Noynoy Aquino. After failing in their use of moral suasion, which worked on the late President Cory Aquino, some vociferous prelates have begun calling for his resignation.

In the wake of recent revelations of how the funds of the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office were raided by Ms Arroyo to reward her favorite politicians and bishops, the Church's position on many contentious issues becomes less persuasive. The growing public perception is that some bishops have behaved badly. And, while it is true that every bishop is autonomous in his own diocese, one cannot ignore the fact that the Church's influence is today mainly felt through the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines.

Unless the CBCP can discipline its own members, it risks eroding what residual force is left in its collective pastoral statements. This erosion will have tremendous consequences, good and bad, not only for the religious sphere, but for the whole society.

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P.S.

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