

# THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH BILL DEBATE: THE PHILIPPINE EXPERIENCE

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The leadership of the Church in the Philippines has historically exercised a powerful influence on politics and social life. The country is at least 80% Catholic and there is a deeply ingrained cultural deference for clergy and religious. Previous attempts in the last 14 years to pass a reproductive health law have failed because of the opposition of Catholic bishops. Thus the recent passage of the ‘Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act of 2012’ (R.A. 10354) was viewed by some Filipinos as a stunning failure for the Church and a sign of its diminished influence on Philippine society.

This article proposes that the Church’s engagement in the reproductive health bill (RH Bill) debate and the manner of its discourse undermined its own campaign to block the law.<sup>1</sup> The first part of the article gives a historical overview of the Church’s opposition to government family planning programs. The second part discusses key points of conflict in the RH Bill debate. The third part will examine factors that shaped the Church’s attitude and responses to the RH Bill. The fourth part will examine the effects of the debate on the Church’s unity, moral authority, and role in Philippine society. The fifth part will draw lessons for the Church and will explore paths that the Church community can take in response to the challenges arising from the law’s implementation.

## I. CHURCH RESPONSES TO GOVERNMENT FAMILY PLANNING PROGRAMS

### *a) The Marcos Administration (1965–1986)*

During the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos, high population growth was viewed by the government as an obstacle to economic growth. In 1969, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) issued a statement on government population control measures. The bishops recognized the government’s competence to use ‘macro-measures’ to address high population growth (e.g., increasing food production, improving access to education, and controlling internal migration). However, the bishops objected to ‘micro-measures’ of the government aimed at encouraging contraceptives and sterilization as means for family planning. The bishops emphasized responsible parenthood education as the proper way to assist married couples to plan their families.<sup>2</sup>

The Commission on Population (POPCOM) was established in 1970 by President Marcos to implement a national family planning program. In 1973 the bishops’ conference expressed its objections to the government’s program in a pastoral letter ‘On the Population Problem and Family Life’. The bishops criticized the government’s bias for promoting artificial means of

family planning rather than natural family planning methods. The bishops also accused the government of giving monetary incentives to health workers to distribute pills and IUDs.<sup>3</sup> The government program ended with the 1986 People Power Revolution against the oppressive Marcos regime. Corazon Aquino, wife of the assassinated political leader Benigno Aquino, Jr., was sworn into office as President.

*b) The Corazon Aquino Administration (1986–1992)*

President Aquino's personal religious convictions and her close relationship with the Church contributed to a radical shift in the government's family planning program. The program expanded its understanding of family planning to include child and maternal health, women's education, and promotion of family well-being.<sup>4</sup> There was a policy shift from 'family planning as a demographic intervention' to 'family planning as a health intervention'.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to the aggressive approach of the Marcos-era program, the Aquino government ensured the right of parents to choose family planning methods according to their religious beliefs.<sup>6</sup>

The government invited a panel of bishops to a dialogue on a proposed national family planning program. The bishops were assured that only legal means of family planning would be made available (abortion is illegal in the Philippines), contraceptive methods or devices that are proven to be abortifacient would be prohibited, and the freedom of conscience of individuals will be respected. Despite these assurances the bishops refused to dialogue with the government. In a 1990 pastoral letter, the bishops accused the government of implementing a population control program aided by international organizations and funding agencies that subscribed to a 'zero-population growth' agenda.<sup>7</sup>

The bishops were particularly concerned about donations of contraceptives from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). A declassified 1974 National Security Study Memorandum (The Kissinger Report) from the United States government argued that high population growth in less developed countries can cause national security problems for the United States.<sup>8</sup> The memorandum identified the Philippines as one of the countries that should receive assistance for 'population moderation'.<sup>9</sup> USAID had been donating free contraceptives to the Philippines since the 1970s. These donations were eventually phased out in 2004.<sup>10</sup> The Aquino government's acceptance of free contraceptives from USAID was interpreted by the bishops as a form of cooperation in a US strategy for global population reduction.

*c) The Ramos Administration (1992–1998)*

President Fidel Ramos, the country's first Protestant president, was elected after Aquino ended her term in office. The Ramos administration's family planning program shifted away from the previous administration's focus on health and gave greater priority to fertility and population reduction in order to achieve the goal of sustainable development.<sup>11</sup> The Church opposed the Ramos program and it organized protest rallies against UN conferences (1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development; 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women) that advocated wider access to family planning supplies and services.<sup>12</sup>

*d) The Estrada Administration (1998–2001)*

President Joseph Estrada was elected after the end of Ramos' term. His administration also pursued the goals of moderating population growth and reducing fertility.<sup>13</sup> President Estrada, accused of corruption, did not finish his term and was eventually overthrown by a second People Power Revolution in 2001. His vice-president, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo took over the presidency.

*e) The Arroyo Administration (2001–2010)*

Devoutly religious, President Arroyo directed her government to promote natural family planning (NFP) as ‘the only acceptable mode of birth control’.<sup>14</sup> In a move that raised concerns about the separation of Church and State, the Arroyo government gave 50 million pesos to a Catholic lay group Couples for Christ to promote NFP in cooperation with the Department of Health.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the Arroyo administration’s all-NFP policy, an attempt was made by some legislators to propose a reproductive health bill in the 11<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1999. This proposal failed to gain sufficient congressional support. In succeeding years other attempts to file similar laws also failed. It was only in 2008, at the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress, that a reproductive health bill, House Bill (H.B.) 5043, gained enough support among legislators to be debated in congressional plenary sessions.

The bishops’ conference issued a 2008 pastoral letter ‘Stand Up for the Gospel of Life’ to express grave concerns about H.B. 5043. These concerns included the following objections: (1) the bill’s ambiguity about the beginning of life could ‘provide a loophole for contraceptives that prevent the implantation of the fertilized ovum’; (2) the provision on mandatory sex education could violate the conscience of teachers who refused to teach about contraceptives as well as violate the right of parents to decide on the education of their children; (3) the provision requiring employers to provide reproductive health services to their employees could violate the conscience of Catholic employers; (4) the provision penalising malicious disinformation about H.B. 5043 could be used to limit freedom of speech. The bishops called for ‘widespread dialogue’ on the bill.<sup>16</sup>

In order to influence the outcome of the legislative debates on H.B. 5043, the bishops’ conference directed individual bishops to meet with their respective congressional representatives to persuade them that it was their moral duty to oppose the bill.<sup>17</sup> The bishops made it clear that the Church would not change its position on contraception and sterilization. While a number of legislators agreed to oppose the RH Bill, some legislators resisted the bishops’ appeal.

The Church decided to use political pressure on congressional supporters of the RH Bill.<sup>18</sup> In its ‘Catechism on Family and Life for the 2010 Elections,’ the bishops stated that ‘it would not be morally permissible to vote for candidates who support anti-family policies.’<sup>19</sup> An official of the Episcopal Commission on Family and Life of the bishops’ conference warned that ‘as the 2010 elections are getting nearer, politicians should not afford to disregard the Catholic Church’s stand on the pro-life issues. Otherwise, the Catholic Church knows how to mobilize its members not to vote for anti-life politicians.’<sup>20</sup> Despite attempts by church leaders to make the RH Bill an election issue, the Filipino electorate still voted for candidates who supported the bill. The 14<sup>th</sup> Congress ended its term during the 2010 general election without passing H.B. 5043. The proposed bill was shelved and the process of proposing a new bill had to start over again with the next Congress.

*f) The Benigno Aquino Administration (2010–present)*

Benigno Aquino III, son of former president Corazon Aquino, was elected President at the end of Arroyo’s term. President Aquino expressed his support for the passage of a reproductive health bill.<sup>21</sup> Benigno Aquino focused on family planning as a health intervention, similar to the family planning policy of his mother’s administration. Unlike his mother, however, Benigno Aquino was ready to face the opposition of the bishops. In 2011, another RH Bill, H.B. 4244, was filed at the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress.<sup>22</sup> In his 2012 State of the Nation Address, he made the passage of the bill a priority of his administration. The bill was debated extensively on television, radio,

print, and blogs. The bishops' conference issued two documents, 'Choosing Life, Rejecting the RH Bill'<sup>23</sup> and 'Proclaim Life... In Season and Out of Season'<sup>24</sup>, urging Filipinos to reject H.B. 4244.

As Congress brought the bill to a final vote near the end of 2012, the bishops issued another pastoral letter 'Contraception is Corruption'<sup>25</sup> urging legislators to vote against the RH Bill. While the congressional debates were still on-going, the Philippine Senate also debated its own version of the bill, Senate Bill (S.B.) 2865. Both the Congress and the Senate eventually passed their respective versions of the bill. A final reproductive health law, Republic Act (R.A.) 10354, consolidated the Congress and Senate versions and was approved by a bicameral committee. The President signed R.A. 10354 on December 21, 2012. The law's implementing rules and regulations were later approved on March 15, 2012. The law's implementation was delayed for more than a year because of a case filed by some Catholics in the Supreme Court questioning the law's constitutionality. On April 8, 2014 the Supreme Court declared the law as constitutional except for eight provisions which were judge unconstitutional and were taken out.

## II. POINTS OF CONTENTION IN THE REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH BILL

This section will discuss the most divisive issues that occupied the bishops and legislators during the RH Bill debates. Most of these issues remain unresolved even after the signing of R.A. 10354. The issues are: abortion, population control, and mandatory reproductive health education.

### *a. Abortion*

There were two major points of disagreements on the issue of abortion. The first point focused on intra-uterine devices (IUDs). As early as 1979, the bishops have condemned IUDs as abortifacients (i.e., devices or drugs that prevent the implantation of a fertilized ovum).<sup>26</sup> The RH Law has a provision that allowed only non-abortifacient contraceptives for sale and distribution. The law, however, still included IUDs among the approved means of family planning. The drafters of the law argued that the primary effect of IUDs is the prevention of fertilization and that the non-implantation of a fertilized ovum as a secondary back-up effect rarely happens.<sup>27</sup> For the bishops, even if IUDs have a low risk of causing the non-implantation of ova, such a risk was still a real and unacceptable threat to the sanctity of life. The bishops continued to regard IUDs as abortifacients and they viewed the language of the law as misleading because it prohibited abortifacients but still allowed IUDs.

A second point of dispute concerns the relationship between contraceptives and abortion. In its official statements the bishops' conference asserted a direct link between contraception and abortion. In its pastoral statement 'Choose Life, Reject the RH Bill', the conference argued that "the very name contraceptive" already reveals the anti-life nature of the means that the RH Bill promotes. These artificial means are fatal to human life, either preventing it from fruition or actually destroying it.<sup>28</sup> In another statement, 'Contraception is Corruption,' the bishops claimed that 'a contraceptive mentality is the mother of an abortion mentality.'<sup>29</sup> These attempts to relate abortion with contraception have caused anxiety for Catholics who feared that their use of contraceptives made them guilty of the sin of abortion. Supporters of the RH Bill have criticized these attempts to identify contraception with abortion as tactical moves to portray the proposed bill as an 'abortion law' and evoke the anti-abortion sentiments of Filipinos.

### *b. Population Control*

The supporters of the RH Law claimed that it was not aimed at population control. The Church leadership insisted that the law was intended as a population control measure and that language used in early versions of the RH Bill clearly expressed concern about population size and growth. For example, H.B. 5043 contained the following guiding principle: ‘the limited resources of the country cannot be suffered to be spread so thinly to service a burgeoning multitude that makes the allocations grossly inadequate and effectively meaningless’ (Sec. 3, e).

The bishops expressed grave apprehension over a provision in H.B. 5043 that recommended an ideal family size of two children. Although the provision did not impose penalties for non-compliance and the provision was later removed to avoid further controversy, the bishops were convinced that the RH Bill was designed to limit population growth. In their 2011 pastoral letter ‘Choosing Life, Rejecting the RH Bill’ the bishops denounced ‘the over-all trajectory of the RH bill towards population control.’

### *c. Mandatory Reproductive Health Education*

The RH Bill provides for mandatory age- and development-appropriate reproductive health education for the youth. A curriculum would be prepared for public schools by the Department of Education (DepEd). Private schools can adopt the curriculum or develop their own, subject to the approval of the DepEd. The bishops did not object to sex education in principle but they insisted that education on human sexuality is best done within the context of the family, not the classroom.<sup>30</sup>

The bishops also argued that such a mandatory curriculum would be contrary to freedom of conscience: ‘... the Bill could violate the consciences of educators who refuse to teach forms of family planning that violate their religious traditions. This provision also could violate the rights of parents to determine the education of their children if the proposed curriculum would contradict their religious beliefs.’<sup>31</sup>

The drafters of the of the bill insisted that mandatory reproductive health education in schools is necessary to decrease the rates of teen-age pregnancy, STD and HIV prevalence, violence against women, and domestic abuse. The church leadership made the counter argument that mandatory sex education in schools would lead to increased promiscuity among the youth and an erosion of moral values. The bishops claimed that through the RH Bill “the youth are being made to believe that sex before marriage is acceptable provided you know how to avoid pregnancy.”<sup>32</sup>

## III. FACTORS THAT SHAPED THE CHURCH’S RESPONSE TO THE RH BILL

This section will examine factors that influenced the attitudes, tactics, and arguments of the Church leadership in its campaign to defeat the RH Bill. The factors to be discussed are: the hierarchy’s Catholic-centric world view, Church and State relations, the structure of the bishops’ conference, and the influence of conservative Catholics.

### *a. The Hierarchy’s Catholic-centric Worldview*

In his study of statements of the bishops’ conference from the 1950s to the present, Jose Mario Francisco, a Jesuit theologian at the Loyola School of Theology, claimed that the local hierarchy has reinforced the image of the Philippines as a Catholic nation through its official pronouncements and devotional practices. The bishops have used this image to associate being a Filipino with being a Catholic.<sup>33</sup> This view of the Philippines as Catholic nation is evident in the

statements of the bishops' conference against the RH Bill. The bishops argued that the bill goes against Filipino religious and moral values because of its promotion of contraceptives.<sup>34</sup>

The bishops' conference had been accused of imposing Catholic views on society in its opposition to RH Bill.<sup>35</sup> Responding to this criticism, the Church leadership claimed that its opposition to contraception was based on natural law. Bishop Gabriel Reyes, chair of the Episcopal Commission on Family and Life, defended the conference's position on the bill:

It is also good to point out that the church teaching regarding contraceptives is not based on Faith or revelation, although it is confirmed by our Faith. This church teaching is based on natural law, which we know through natural reason. By studying through correct reasoning the nature of the human person, we arrive at this teaching regarding contraception. All human beings, Catholic or not, are obliged to act according to right reason. By the efforts of the Church to go against the RH Bill, the Church is not imposing her religious beliefs on others. She is trying to stop a bill which is against natural law, a law which all human beings, Catholic or not, should follow. The RH Bill, judged from the principles of natural law, is against the good of the human person and the common good...<sup>36</sup>

Joaquin Bernas, a Jesuit constitutional lawyer and newspaper columnist, however, publicly challenged the bishop's appeal to natural law and right reason as the basis for opposition to the bill:

... this is the bishop's third point, natural law prohibits contraception and natural law binds everyone because "by studying through correct reasoning the nature of the human person, we arrive at this teaching regarding contraception."

One might flippantly answer by asking whose correct reasoning are we talking about? Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Grisez, Chappell, Finnis, etc.? But the statement deserves more than just a flippant answer. And it is not flippant to say that many serious thinkers have also studied the human person and have not arrived at the conclusion that contraception is evil. Serious thinkers of other religions have not arrived at such conclusion and for that reason the various religions in the Philippines are not of one mind on the subject.<sup>37</sup>

In another newspaper article Bernas insisted that the Church respect the freedom of religion of non-Catholics on matters of family planning.

I am very much aware of the fact that we live in a pluralist society where various religious groups have differing beliefs about the morality of artificial contraception. But freedom of religion means more than just the freedom to believe. It also means the freedom to act or not to act according to what one believes. Hence, the state should not prevent people from practicing responsible parenthood according to their religious belief nor may churchmen compel President Aquino, by whatever means, to prevent people from acting according to their religious belief.<sup>38</sup>

The bishops, however, do not acknowledge in their statements the existence of a plurality of legitimate views on contraception. They claimed that those who supported the bill were influenced by secularism, materialism, and post-modern thinking.<sup>39</sup>

#### *b. Church and State Relations*

The bishops' conference has been a staunch defender of democracy, especially when human rights, civilian rule, and the sanctity of the ballot are threatened. On certain issues, however, the Church leadership is ready to intervene in legislation and governance when it perceives that some of its values and interests are threatened. In these situations the Church leaders would invoke the superiority of divine law over human law. This, for example, was the late Cardinal

Jaime Sin's complaint about the Marcos government's population control program: 'The Philippine Government does not follow the Church, despite the fact that the Philippine population is predominantly and overwhelmingly Catholic and therefore bound under pain of sin to obey the teachings of the Catholic Church.'<sup>40</sup>

The late cardinal's view of the primacy of the Church over the State on matters of population is a view that was shared by some bishops and laity during the RH Bill debates. Some bishops have been accused of promoting a theocratic view of society that privileges Catholic teaching as the basis for legislation. Bishops have used political threats to pressure legislators to vote against the RH Bill. Legislators were warned that if they voted to pass the bill, they might face defeat in their re-election campaigns. While the bishops' conference has a policy of not endorsing political candidates, it allows individual bishops to endorse or denounce candidates in their districts. When R.A. 10354 was passed by Congress in 2012 a number of Catholic lay groups, supported by some priests and bishops started a Catholic Vote Movement for the 2013 general election to punish legislators who voted for the law.<sup>41</sup> A few bishops openly endorsed "pro-life" candidates who vowed to challenge the law in the Supreme Court. In a controversial move, the Archdiocese of Bacolod posted two large banners outside its cathedral. One banner listed candidates who opposed the bill and were referred to as 'Team Life' while the other banner listed candidates who supported the bill and were called 'Team Death'. Despite criticism that such banners constituted inappropriate political activity other dioceses posted similar banners on their churches.

It should be noted, however, that there were moderate bishops who resisted using pressure politics during the RH Bill debate. Archbishop Jose Palma of Cebu prohibited his clergy from using the pulpit to campaign against legislators who support the bill.<sup>42</sup> Archbishop Socrates Villegas of Lingayen-Dagupan urged fellow bishops not to endorse candidates because it would compromise the Church's spiritual mission.<sup>43</sup> Despite the efforts of these bishops to avoid single-issue politics during the elections, the widely publicized efforts of some bishops and lay groups to organize a punitive Catholic vote gave the impression that the Church was engaging in partisan politics in its fight against the RH Bill.

### *c. The Structure of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines*

There is a false public perception that the bishops' conference is a monolithic organization that thinks and moves as one. Although the conference publishes official statements, local implementation of what the bishops have agreed on can vary widely. Neither the conference nor any bishop can dictate how an individual bishop should implement conference statements in his diocese or how he should speak on issues discussed in these statements. Some bishops are very vocal in their opposition to the bill and have publicly attacked the bill's proponents while other bishops have avoided a confrontational approach in the debate. An example of moderation is Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle of the Archdiocese of Manila. He focused on religious and human values that promoted respect for human life and avoided harsh criticism of supporters of the bill. Another example is Archbishop Antonio Ledesma of Cagayan de Oro who chose not to dwell on the bill's promotion of contraceptives and instead actively promoted natural family planning as a viable option for married couples.

Because of the loose structure of the bishop's conference and the independence of each separate bishop, the more vocal bishops disproportionately influenced the conversation within the Church regarding the RH Bill. Bishops strongly opposed to the bill often gave interviews while bishops in favour of dialogue avoided speaking publicly in order not to be accused of compromising the official Church position. By default, the bishops who were more visible in the news media became the voice of the Church in the debate.

*d. The Influence of Doctrinally Conservative Catholics*

An important but often unrecognized factor that shaped the Church's discourse is the influence of doctrinally conservative Catholics on key leaders in the Church. These conservatives framed the RH Bill debate as a battle of good versus evil and rejected any negotiation with the government. Their hard-line tactics included name-calling (e.g., referring to drafters of the bill as supporters of abortion), disruption of public fora on the RH Bill, questioning the orthodoxy of bishops and theologians who attempted to dialogue with the government, and threats of church sanctions against Catholics who supported the bill. These conservative Catholics fostered a polemical atmosphere that made it difficult to initiate rational and civil discussions on the RH Bill.

All these factors influenced the Church leadership to adopt an aggressive approach to defeat the RH Bill. This approach ultimately resulted in damage to the unity of the Catholic community and a diminishment of the Church credibility in society. The collateral damage of the debate to the Church will be examined in the next section.

#### IV. THE EFFECTS OF THE RH BILL DEBATE ON THE CHURCH

The most immediate effect of the debate on the Church was the fragmentation of the Catholic community. Despite the claims of the bishops of a united Church stand against the RH Bill,<sup>44</sup> Filipino Catholics took different positions on the bill. Those who rejected the bill in its entirety were very visible in the media but they were a minority in the total Catholic population. There were Catholics who disagreed with the bill but were willing to discuss possible amendments with legislators. A few bishops, theologians, and Catholic business leaders have worked quietly behind-the-scenes with the government possible ways to amend problematic provisions.

The majority of Filipino Catholics supported the RH Bill. A survey taken in 2008 showed that 71% of Filipino Catholics supported the bill.<sup>45</sup> The acceptance of the bill by a majority of Filipino Catholics is reflective of their attitude toward family planning. A 2011 Family Health Survey by the government indicated that 51.1% of currently married women of reproductive age (15–49 years old) do not use any family planning method, whether artificial or natural. Around 34.9 % use modern means of contraception or sterilization while less than 4% use natural family planning as recommended by the Church.<sup>46</sup>

Some Catholics expressed publicly their dissent from the bishops' position. The acts of dissent that created the most controversy were by academics from Catholic universities. Fourteen faculty members of the Ateneo de Manila University, a Jesuit-run institution, released a position paper entitled 'Catholics Can Support the RH Bill in Good Conscience'.<sup>47</sup> They cited Catholic social teachings to argue that the proposed law was consistent with the promotion of the common good. Shortly after, forty-five faculty members of De La Salle University, an institution run by the Christian Brothers, also released a statement entitled 'The RH Bill is Pro-Life'.<sup>48</sup>

Another significant effect of the debate on the Church was the erosion of the hierarchy's moral authority and stature in society. The debate on the RH Bill provided an opportunity for Filipinos to disagree with and openly criticize the hierarchy not only about its position on the RH Bill but also on a variety of issues such as the Church's treatment of women, the sex abuse scandal, and clergy involvement in partisan politics. Such criticism was extraordinary because Filipinos are generally deferential to representatives of the Church. In an unprecedented way, various sectors of society expressed their disagreement with church leaders through newspaper

editorials, academic papers, petitions, blog postings, chain emails, and street protests. Parishioners have walked out of masses where the RH Bill was criticized during the priest's homily. Mary Racelis, a social anthropologist, observed that 'not since the Philippine Revolution of 1896 has the Filipino laity challenged the bishops' authority so openly and overwhelmingly'.<sup>49</sup>

What helped convince Catholics that it was acceptable to openly disagree with the Church on the RH Bill were the actions of Catholic politicians and legislators who supported the bill and the writings of clergy (mostly Jesuits) such as Joaquin Bernas, John J. Carroll, Joel Tabora, and the late Bishop Francisco Claver who used their newspaper columns and blogs to challenge the Catholic-centric and theocratic arguments of some Church leaders in the debate.

The signing into law of R.A. 10354 was reported by the media as a major blow to Church's authority and credibility in Philippine society. The Church is now aware that the government, civil society, the media and many Catholics are less likely to accept its pronouncements at face value and are more ready to disagree with the Church than they had before.

#### V. LESSONS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The aggressive approach adopted by some clerical and lay leaders in their fight against the bill led to inappropriate tactics that undermined the Church's moral authority. The use of pressure politics compromised the Church's role as a non-partisan guardian of elections. Delaying tactics supported by the bishops during the legislative debates diminished the reputation of the Church as a fair player in a democratic society. The hierarchy's cooperation with conservative Catholics to reduce the discussions on the RH bill to the single issue of abortion drove moderate Catholics to open dissent against the Church leadership. In hindsight, the hierarchy needs to review its methods and tactics in its continuing campaign against the RH Law.

The Church leadership also needs to accept the reality that the deference Filipino Catholics have toward clergy and religious does not necessarily translate to acceptance of every pronouncement by the bishops. In the RH Bill debate Filipino Catholics have shown that they can make up their own minds with regard to matters of politics, contraception, and family planning. Pastors no longer can appeal simply to authority in order to gain assent of the laity. They need to speak and act in ways that the laity will find credible and convincing.

The Church leadership should recognize the areas of weakness in the structure of the bishops' conference that prevent it from engaging moral issues in a consistent and balanced manner. One area of weakness is the lack of coordination among the bishops in the conference. The uneven way individual bishops dealt with the RH bill caused confusion for the public and made it difficult for legislators to dialogue with the entire hierarchy. Another area of structural weakness of the Church is its susceptibility to influence by conservative lobby groups. The bishops' conference has allowed key positions in its structure to be held by doctrinally conservative clergy and lay people who excluded or demonized moderate voices and overemphasized traditionalism over other important values such as the primacy of conscience, respect for religious freedom, and openness to dialogue.

The bishops must be more aware that they should not impose a Catholic world-view when they engage the government and the general public on matters related to the common good, such as reproductive health issues. The Church should also use more rational and evidence-based arguments rather than appeals to emotion, alarmist scenarios, unsupported claims, and anecdotal information when speaking to the public. Appeals to authority and threats of church sanctions have proven to be counterproductive, provoking dissent from Catholics and criticism from the media.

There are several challenges that the Church must prepare to face in the aftermath of the passage of the RH Law. The most basic challenge is to regain the goodwill and trust of Catholics who have been discouraged and alienated by Church tactics during the RH Bill debate. A second challenge for the hierarchy is the need to respond in an appropriate way to the implementation of the RH Law. The hierarchy has to be ready to address in a constructive and rational manner the RH Law's provisions that allow IUDs and impose mandatory reproductive health education in public schools. A third challenge is for the CBCP to counter the inordinate influence of conservatives within its structure. This is an urgent task because of forthcoming legislative proposals on divorce and same-sex unions that are likely to follow after the passage of the RH Law. The Church cannot risk another self-defeating conservative-led crusade that would further antagonize both Catholics and civil society

The election of Pope Francis a few months after the passing of the RH Law provides a timely opportunity for the Church in the Philippines to transform its manner of discourse on national issues. The simplicity and humility in the tone and style of the new papacy can serve as a starting point for the bishops as they shift their approach from a manner that is authoritarian to one that is more dialogical and pastoral. Francis' criticism of the overemphasis of some clergy on strict obedience to norms can empower moderate bishops. The bishops should seriously consider the words of Pope Francis:

The church's pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently... We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel.<sup>50</sup>

Francis' insistence on a more contextual approach to the issue of contraception can be an invitation to the bishops to widen their perspective and study the underlying factors behind the general non-observance of the majority of Filipino Catholics of the teaching on contraception.<sup>51</sup> The Church leadership needs to consider adequately how poverty, domestic violence, lack of access to affordable health care, large families, and other factors influence the reproductive health decisions of many men and women. Rather than insist on strict observance of the teaching on contraception, bishops need to apply the pastoral 'law of gradualness' that calls for sacramental accompaniment of persons in imperfect situations in their journey of growth.<sup>52</sup> Pastors also need to be reminded that 'the Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak' (*Evangelii Gaudium* #47). The renewed public interest in the Church brought about by the papacy of Francis can be the opportunity that the hierarchy needs to rebuild its relationship with the government and civil society as it also seeks to heal the divisions in the Catholic community caused by the RH Bill debate.

## Notes

1 The term 'RH Bill' will be used to refer to early versions of the reproductive health law that were proposed in the legislature for debate. The term 'RH Law' will refer specifically to the 'Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act of 2012'. The term 'RH Bill Debate' refers to both formal legislative debates and public discussions on the RH Bill prior to the passage of R.A. 10354.

2 Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), 'Statement of Bishops on Public Policy Regarding Population Growth Control', CBCP Online, July 4, 1969, accessed September 2, 2013, <http://cbcponline.net/v2/?p=8028>.

3 CBCP, 'Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Hierarchy of the Philippines on the Population Problem and Family Life', CBCP Online, December 8, 1973, accessed September 2, 2013, [http://www.cbcponline.net/documents/1970s/1973-population\\_problem.html](http://www.cbcponline.net/documents/1970s/1973-population_problem.html)

4 Alejandro N. Herrin, *Population Policy in the Philippines 1969–2002* (Makati City, Philippines: Philippine Institute of Developmental Studies, 2002), 18–19, Discussion Paper Series 2002–08, accessed September 9, 2013, <http://dirp3.pids.gov.ph/ris/pdf/pidsdps0208.pdf>

5 Ibid., 21.

6 Ibid.

7 CBCP, 'Pastoral Letter on Population Control Activities of the Philippine Government and Planned Parenthood Associations', CBCP Online, October 7, 1990, accessed September 4, 2013, <http://cbcponline.net/v2/?p=324>.

8 United States National Security Council, 'National Security Study Memorandum 200: Implication of Worldwide Population Growth for US Security and Overseas Interests', Washington DC: National Security Council, 1974, 8, accessed September 4, 2013, [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PCAAB500.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PCAAB500.pdf)

9 Ibid., 10.

10 J.M. Ian Salas, 'Subsidized Contraceptives Benefit Disadvantaged Women', Population Reference Bureau, August 2013, accessed September 4, 2013, <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2013/subsidized-contraception.aspx>.

11 Herrin, *Population Policy in the Philippines*, 22.

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