



# An Agenda for the Church in the Current Political Climate

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The Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines today faces a challenge to her ethics greater than any since the final years of the Marcos dictatorship. The extraordinarily large number of killings of suspects in the government's campaign against drugs and crime, an even larger number of killings of suspects by supposed anti-crime vigilantes, and the push to restore the death penalty all contravene the value for life that the Church holds central to her teaching. The open denigration of human rights by public officials, their undisguised threats against human rights defenders, and the legal and extralegal restriction of democratic rights and space violate her moral teaching on human dignity and people empowerment. Yet when the Church speaks out against these ethical ruptures, she also confronts an unprecedented challenge to her moral authority, evinced by an exceptional degree of public hostility and vilification.

Taken aback by this new situation, the Church has been divided, sometimes bitterly, over how to respond. The joint statements of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines in January 2017 seem to demonstrate the unity of the hierarchy in condemning the killings, encouraging Catholics to resist the restoration of the death penalty, and calling for serious study of the implications of constitutional change. But the joint statements conceal major differences of opinion even among the bishops, differences which mirror those of the lower clergy, religious, and laity. These differences fall into four general modes.

First, there are Catholics, perhaps the majority, who are content to attend or say Mass, receive or dispense the sacraments, perform religious devotions, and avoid personal sin, or just to strive to live happily and decently within the confines of their immediate familial, work-related, parochial, and social milieu, insulating themselves as well as they can from the contamination of our society's moral illnesses.

Second, there are Catholics who defend with great passion and even moral conviction the death penalty and the killings in the anti-drugs campaign. These, they say, are essential forms of purification which correctly champion the rights of the innocent victims and potential victims of crime against those of the undeserving perpetrators, and which dutifully help God to cleanse Philippine society of its corrupt elements, so that we might start afresh in our journey toward becoming God's shining Kingdom. There are Catholics who view the contraction of human rights and democratic space as a necessary restoration of order, arguing that the Church's commitment to human dignity does not require a commitment to liberal democracy, particularly in times of cataclysmic criminality and terror.

Third, there are Catholics who rue the killings, the death penalty, the human rights breaches, and creeping authoritarianism, but who hold that the Church must enter into a new era of relative silence and self-limitation on political issues. Now, say these, is no longer the time to confront the state about its ethical deficits, because such criticism merely reinforces our people's cynicism about politics, and moreover makes it appear that the Church is taking sides or being obstructionist, thus further discrediting her in the eyes of the faithful. Better to point out and praise the positive. Better to work with the government where we can, or separately and quietly where we cannot, to alleviate in some small way the pain of those who suffer from state policies and practices that the Church must be humble enough to admit she has no power or authority or right to stop.

Finally, there are Catholics for whom self-insulation, support of the state's unethical policies and practices, and silence are complicity in evil. Self-insulation, support, and silence, say these, are all forms of consent to the erosion of the democratic rights and liberties that are vital not only to the institutional survival of the Church, but to the construction of a kingdom of God founded on human dignity. Self-insulation, support, and silence stain the Church's hands with the blood of abominable sacrifice, in which the primary victims are the poor, the weak, and sinners, those whom Christ came first of all to save. Self-insulation, support, and silence, far from averting cynicism, foster it by teaching those whom Christ came first of all to save that saving them is not the Church's priority. Self-insulation, support, and silence foster cynicism by allowing the faithful to believe that what is morally wrong is right, or that what is morally right is not right for politics. Speech and action against evil, say these Catholics, are ethical and prophetic obligations, and also democratic ones, sustaining moral discourse, dissent, and human life against the state's amoral efficiency, authoritarianism, and death-dealing.

Our own institute identifies with the fourth mode. Although not averse to working with the government where such collaboration is consistent with Gospel values, we view the administration's lethal and less than democratic solutions to our country's problems as too egregious to let pass in silence and immobility. But what must we say about them, how must we say it, and what can we do about them?

#### WHAT SHOULD THE CHURCH BE TALKING ABOUT?

Catholic social principles. These provide a solid and coherent set of ethical foundations from which to challenge the inhumane, violent, and authoritarian efficiency that some in the state advocate. Catholic social principles have the added advantage of being universal and potentially acceptable to a broad range of other religious as well as secular groups. These may therefore

provide a nonsectarian and nonpartisan ethical perspective around which Catholics and non-Catholics, and administration critics and supporters can in principle seek agreement.

The signs of the times. General ethical principles, however much talked about, are sterile unless used as standards to assess social structures, the state's policies and practices, legislation, and civil society mobilization. For over eight decades now our bishops have, in their joint and individual pastoral documents, articulated the ethical lenses of the Church through which we as Catholics are invited to view contemporary social situations, and have shared with us what they have seen through these lenses. We trust they will continue courageously to do so, now more than ever. But we, too, must take the initiative to use these lenses, and to teach others how to use them, in formulating analyses and responses.

The lessons of history. Not only do many of our people seem to have no historical memory of the nightmare of Martial Law under Marcos; some even seem to have transformed that nightmare into a dream of Paradise Lost. There are those, even within the Church, who invoke reconciliation as a reason for allowing that forgetfulness of wrong, and that reinterpretation of the nightmare into a dream of utopia. But true reconciliation must be based on a clear remembrance of the wrongs of the past so that, for the good of the entire community, they might not be repeated in the present. The Church, a moral community commanded by Christ to promote righteousness and a 2,000-year-old institution that cherishes memory and tradition in the service of righteousness, can do much to promote critical sociohistorical memory framed in Gospel values. In bible study groups, classrooms, seminars, articles, homilies, and pastoral letters that discuss current issues, we must continue to study the past—particularly when confronted by contemporary situations that seem to repeat it—and to draw lessons from it.

The role of the Church, and of different segments of the Church, in politics. The separation of Church and State and the Church's self-imposed rule of institutional nonpartisanship are principles subject to much misinterpretation and misrepresentation in the service of silence and immobility. We must teach that the separation of Church and State merely prohibits the State from using its resources to support any one religion, or from exercising control over any religion; but that it does not prohibit Catholics from bringing our ethical principles to bear on social and political situations, or from participating in political action to change those situations. We must teach that on the contrary, Catholic participation in public discourse is a moral obligation particularly in cases in which Gospel values must be defended or upheld vis-à-vis public policy or state practice. We must teach that while the Church's own laws—not the Philippine Constitution—discourage partisanship among the clergy and the religious, partisanship is a vocation that the Church accepts and even encourages among the laity; that criticism of certain state policies and practices on the basis of ethical principles is not by itself partisanship; and that the duty to fight for what is clearly right, or against what is clearly wrong, overrides the duty even for the clergy and the religious to remain politically neutral. Finally, we must teach that the laity prove themselves "servants of the Church" not by waiting for marching orders from the bishops about specific political situations, but rather by using the Church's ethics to decide for themselves what to do.

## HOW SHOULD THE CHURCH BE TALKING ABOUT THESE THINGS?

Avoid demonization and find common ground. It is tempting—for those of us who passionately disagree with the Duterte administration's attitude toward democracy, human rights, and the value of life—to demonize it and those who support it. But the things that the president and some of his officials and supporters do and say, which cause such moral outrage in us, are like a mirror, showing us the dark side of our political culture which has been hidden under the veneer of democratic compliance heretofore adopted by the state and by most of the political class. Indeed the darkest shadows of the Duterte administration mirror back to us the darkest side in each one of us: the violence and intolerance in our own hearts, even when we oppose its policies out of a commitment to nonviolence, human dignity, the rule of law, and democracy. At the same time, the Duterte administration is not all shadow, but imbued with patches of light, notably its economic and social agenda for the poor and its initiatives for peace with belligerent groups. Within it are some people of good will, struggling like ourselves to find solutions that work for the greatest common good, even if these solutions may differ from ours.

For these reasons, demonization—a mistake we made in the battle over the Reproductive Health (RH) Law—is not the answer. It should be a significant lesson for the Church that some who were her most maligned opponents in that battle are now her staunchest allies in the battle against the death penalty and the violence of the anti-drugs campaign. Their consistency in standing with the Church on those issues, with no promise of political gain and every likelihood of political punishment, perhaps including defeat in the next round of elections, bespeaks a moral courage and self-sacrifice that equals, nay, surpasses those of many Catholics who, at the height of the anti-RH campaign, sanctimoniously labeled them “pro-death.”

This does not mean that we in the Church should not admonish. There is much to admonish in the Duterte administration, and admonition is an important part of our prophetic mission as Church. But when we admonish, we might do so in a way that recognizes the humanity, capacity for reason, and potential for redemption of the opponent—just as we want those who applaud the death penalty and the killing of drug suspects to recognize the humanity, capacity for reason, and potential for redemption of the supposed wrongdoer. We might also strive to find what fundamental ethical principles we share with the adversary, and to work at building common ground for collaboration on common solutions.

There are some solutions on which no collaboration is possible: for instance, the violence of the campaign against drugs. And there may yet come a time, as in 1986, that the political situation grows so stark there will be no choice but to render the struggle as one between good and evil. But our first disposition as Church should be to pray that such a situation will not arise, and that we will be dealing instead with many shades of gray, however deep.

Teach and learn by listening, especially to those who do not share our views. It is not sufficient to preach at people and tell them what they ought and ought not to believe or do. It is also important to listen—even to non-Catholics and to those Catholics who are nominal, peripheral, ritualistic, overly devotional, alienated, or hostile; even to those who support the Duterte's administration's most morally appalling policies. We need to understand why some Catholics might agree with those policies, or disagree with the Church's basic teachings about them. Only

by listening can we address those reasons in respectful but edifying ways, and encourage our interlocutors to listen to our own.

Basic Ecclesial Communities, prayer groups, and other small Church communities provide natural safe spaces in which people can work out their feelings, agreements, and disagreements with controversial government policies or Church teaching. In our bible study groups or other forms of Catholic community, we can read, reflect on, and discuss articles written by those who do not share our perspectives. Parishes, dioceses, and other Catholic organizations might hold discussions to which non-Catholics and dissenting Catholics are invited to speak. Perhaps our bishops can also establish more institutionalized opportunities for listening to voices they do not usually hear.

### WHAT CAN WE DO?

#### Mobilize the social infrastructure of the Church for the promotion of Catholic social principles.

The Church has a powerful social infrastructure that can be used to promote Catholic social principles: the CBCP's Episcopal commissions and committees; diocesan social action centers and parish Social Services and Development ministries; diocesan and parish Public Affairs Ministries; mandated organizations such as the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPRCV), the Catholic Women's League, and the Knights of Columbus; transparochial organizations such as the Christian Family Movement, Couples for Christ, Light of Jesus, Ligaya sa Panginoon, and El Shaddai; the Catholic Educators' Association of the Philippines (CEAP); and school-based organizations such as Student Catholic Action (SCA). These can also serve as fora for the study and analysis of specific social issues in the light of those principles.

Work for and with the victims and survivors of the campaign against drugs and crime. The violence of the campaign against drugs and crime calls for very particular and urgent responses. Some bishops, parish priests, and religious congregations, in cooperation with human rights and other secular groups, are providing sanctuary, rehabilitation, and training in alternative livelihood for drug users and sellers, as well as sanctuary and succor for survivors of violence and the families of those killed. With thousands slain, the bereaved are in the tens of thousands—a human-made disaster on the scale of a major typhoon. Their circumstances are especially delicate: deprived of breadwinners, shunned by neighbors, sometimes hounded by police and vigilantes, sometimes forced to flee their homes. Their needs—for funeral expenses, trauma debriefing, food, shelter, schooling, resettlement, livelihood—are far too many and pressing for the few Church people and organizations striving to help them. If more diocesan social action centers, parish Social Services and Development Ministries, and Catholic schools and student organizations could be mobilized to provide donations, trauma counseling, scholarships, livelihood training, and other services for the families of victims, this would do much to support a needy and marginalized group of people that might otherwise be further alienated and drawn into crime and violent ways. It would also help to break the self-insulation and expand the social awareness and compassion of those Catholics mobilized for this work.

Documentation of cases is another pressing need vis-à-vis the victims of the anti-drugs campaign and their survivors—and one with more long-term political implications. When the killing stops, as someday we hope it will, moral and political accounting will be necessary for national healing, with killers and other human rights abusers brought to justice and made to

answer for their deeds. If parish public affairs ministries could be trained to gather basic documentation on the victims in their communities and on the circumstances of their deaths, and that documentation centralized in diocesan public affairs ministries, this would constitute a valuable trove of evidence for exacting accountability in the future. Documentation could also have more immediate benefits if it encompasses data on surviving families which could be used to identify what concrete forms of help they need. Those involved in the documentation might also find that the work enlarges their compassion and social awareness.

In connection with documentation, another service that can be done for victims and survivors is to write and tell stories about them and their families—though it will probably do more good to those who write, hear, and read these stories than to the victims and survivors themselves. Such stories are a powerful witness to the humanity of the victims and their families, enabling writers, hearers, and readers to establish solidarity with them and to realize the damage done by the violence.

Undertake other initiatives with groups disprivileged by Duterte administration policies and priorities. Only people possessed of great courage and compassion will want to work directly with drug abusers, drug sellers, and the families of those killed in the campaign against drugs. But there are other sectors which stand to be disprivileged by Duterte administration policies and legislative priorities, and which might be less daunting for volunteers to work with. How can Social Services and Development Ministries and other Catholic organizations cooperate in the rehabilitation of street children and children in conflict with the law—all potential targets of the violence of the anti-drugs campaign—in their particular communities? How can Church organizations be mobilized for more consistent and systematic aid to the incarcerated, as their numbers swell beyond the capacities of our jails and prisons? What can be done to help those in prison and those returning from prison to equip themselves for reintegration into society?

Strengthen livelihood programs for the poor, particularly in communities with drug problems. One obvious reason individuals turn to the sale of drugs for a living is the lack of economic opportunities. The Church, particularly through the diocesan Social Action Centers, has long been involved in promoting livelihood programs for the poor. Perhaps a special effort can be made to identify communities in which the sale of drugs is a particular problem, and to provide alternative livelihood for the people of such communities.

Mobilize, when necessary, the social infrastructure of the Church against policies and legislation that violate Catholic social principles. The first Walk for Life on 18 February 2017 was billed as the largest mobilization as of that date against the Duterte administration's "anti-life" policies. Those drawn into this exercise were not just the "usual suspects"—groups of the secular left, supporters of various opposition political parties, or members of secular human rights organizations—but also ordinary unpoliticized Catholics from parishes across the archdiocese of Manila and other dioceses. For such people the Walk for Life, billed though it was as an exercise in prayer, was also an empowering exercise in democratic dissent. And although the mobilization cannot be said to have stopped the killings, it may have given pause to senators inclined for tactical reasons to support the death penalty. More mobilizations of this kind can strengthen the voice of the Church in the public sphere, as well as the voices and political

muscles of individual Catholics who might otherwise be fearful of expressing opinions opposed to those of the administration or their own communities.

Thought should be given to reorienting and reharnessing the energies of the Catholic prolife movement, highly visible during the battle over the RH bill in the 1990s and 2000s. The movement has maintained a lower profile under the Duterte administration, emerging only occasionally to inveigh against such issues as proposed divorce legislation and artificial contraception. Yet in the administration's push for the death penalty, in the violence of its campaign against drugs, and in its lack of regard for civil and human rights lie threats to life greater than those from artificial contraception or expanded divorce legislation. The campaign against drugs has killed thousands upon thousands more than has the RH Law. It is perhaps more difficult for some prolife activists to feel compassion toward drug and crime suspects than toward the unborn and as yet unconceived, who can be suspected of no crimes and can have made no mistakes in their lives. But under the leadership of a pope who talks constantly about God's mercy and the Catholic obligation to incarnate it, the Catholic prolife movement may benefit from reflection that the imperative to protect life must include even the lives of suspected or even self-confessed sinners, those of whom the pope finds himself saying "Why them and not me?"

Strengthen alliances with secular civil society groups on common issues. The violence of the campaign against drugs and crime, its lack of regard for the rule of law, the push to restore the death penalty, the push for more authoritarian political arrangements, and the rhetoric of some administration officials on civil and human rights and on women have raised concerns among certain sectors of secular civil society—human rights activists, feminists, and journalists—which were important allies of the Church during the Marcos dictatorship. In the years since 1986, human rights activists' championship of the rights of those identifying themselves as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Queer (LGBTQ), the feminist movement's advocacy for the RH Bill, and the perceived anticlericalism of "the secular mass media" have caused some in the Church to see them, and some of them to see the Church, as "the enemy." But the issues these sectors now have with the Duterte administration are potential bases of agreement and cooperation with the Church. Moreover, the Church's positions on these issues have lately gained the respect of many in these sectors, who now view the Church once again as an important ally. Such shared positions provide an opening for the Church to mend fences and collaborate with its old allies to defend democracy and human rights, even if the Church cannot agree with them on other issues. If this opportunity were wasted, it would leave civil society divided and diminished, unable to resist effectively that which must for the sake of right be resisted in the state's policies and practices. Even more importantly for the Church's primary mission, witnessing to Christ through such collaboration provides an opening for quiet and gentle re-evangelization, in which those once alienated from the Church may come to rediscover that which is attractive to them in the liberating message of the Gospels.

Cultivate allies in the legislature, the judiciary, the executive branch, the army, and the police, and collaborate with them on those aspects of its agenda which are consistent with Catholic teaching. Within the legislature, the judiciary, and the executive branch it is possible to find people of conscience who, whether or not they agree with the Church on all important issues, can agree with her on at least some of them. It is important to build relationships with such

individuals and to collaborate with them on efforts that defend human rights, empower the poor, protect the environment, and promote peace—taking care, however, that these relationships do not develop into patronage, or compromise the principles of the Church. While high-ranking officials can affect policy and legislation, barangay officials, who occupy the lowest rung on the political ladder, can affect the lives of their communities in a very material way. One barangay captain, for instance, by using the grapevine and the closed circuit television cameras in her community to detect nocturnal visits of police and supposed vigilantes, and by subsequently “welcoming” them loudly on the public address system, may have been able to deter them from performing some executions, and thus spared the lives of some constituents. Such heroic local officials need moral and political support for their efforts to resist state policies and practices inimical to life and to human and democratic rights. The Ugnayang Barangay at Simbahan (UBAS) provides an opening for parish cooperation with the state at the level of its most basic political unit, and also for dialogue and moral influence with its officials. Members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine National Police who are committed to civilian authority and to human rights can be crucial allies, as monitors and defenders of human rights and constitutionality within these institutions, as conduits of information to civil and political society, and as mediators to save lives.

## CONCLUSION

The Duterte administration poses a difficult challenge to the Church today—but also a tremendous opportunity for participating in the building of the nation. By sharing Catholic social principles, using them to read the signs of the times and the lessons of history, sharing these signs and lessons, and defending and demonstrating the role of the Church in public life, the Church can do much to inform and turn public discourse and establish a stable ethical anchorage amidst the violent and authoritarian tendencies of state policy and practice. By listening and avoiding demonization, the Church can strive to establish dialogue and common ground with those who disagree with her ethical positions and teaching. By mobilizing her network to teach Catholic social principles, to work for and with those most adversely affected by state policies and practices, and to collaborate with potential allies in secular civil society and in government, the Church can help to save lives that might otherwise be lost, help her own to learn democratic citizenship, help stave off a return to authoritarianism, and help lay the groundwork for social change based on the best and most universal of her principles.

But most of all the Duterte administration provides an opportunity for witnessing to Christ—for channeling to his people his love for the poor, the weak, and sinners, and for emulating his willingness to pay the price for this love. It is at the moment of the crucifixion, broken in body, that Christ most vividly demonstrates his love for us. So too, it is at this moment when many in the Church’s flock are in such mortal danger, her moral authority challenged, and her own weaknesses exposed by those who reject her teachings yet fear their moral power, that the Church can most vividly demonstrate his love for us, and her own love for the broken body of Christ. May our Church today be like the stubborn, courageous women who, defying fear and peril to themselves, remained at the foot of the cross, attended him to his grave in the darkness, and were the first witnesses to the light of his resurrection.