

The Performance of the Christian Faith under a Populist President: The Case of the Philippine Church under Duterte¹

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Abstract: President Rodrigo Duterte has been consistent in his attacks against the Catholic Church. True to his campaign promise, he has unleashed his brutal “war on drugs” which has resulted to the deaths of thousands of suspected drug dependents and pushers. In response to his criticisms and the excesses of his anti-illegal drugs program, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines has issued various pastoral statements in faithfulness to its mission. Nevertheless, the majority of Filipinos continue to support Duterte and his anti-illegal drugs stance. In this context, the call of Pope Francis’ for the church to become a “field hospital” becomes all the more pastorally relevant.

Keywords: War on drugs • Catholic Church • Field hospital • Human rights • President Rodrigo Duterte • Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines

Introduction

The Philippines has never had a chief executive in its history who has had no qualms in attacking the church and who in the process has not lost any political capital.

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For instance, during the celebration of the 120th anniversary of Baptists in the Philippines on 16 January 2020, President Rodrigo R. Duterte once again launched a tirade against the Catholic Church, attacks which drew the laughter and applause of his audience.² In the face of such a populist president³ who has embarked on his “war on drugs” and all its attendant human rights abuses, it appears that the church is a divided community. On one hand, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) has issued pastoral letters criticizing the excesses of the president’s statements and the human rights abuses brought about by the government’s drug policies. Individual bishops have also spoken openly against extra-judicial killings in their localities. Various local churches have established their drug rehabilitation centers and programs in response to the government’s criticisms that the church has not done anything about the drug-problem.⁴ On the other hand, there are

² Darryl John Esguerra, “Duterte Lambasts Catholic Church Anew in Curse-Laden Speech before Filipino Baptists,” 16 January 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1214254/duterte-lambasts-catholic-church-anew-in-curse-laden-speech-before-filipino-baptists> (accessed 26 January 2020). During what was National Baptist Day, the anti-Catholicism of the audience reared its ugly head (Jayeel S. Cornelio, “National Baptist Day: Laughing instead of Mourning,” 21 January 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/249837-opinion-national-baptist-day-laughing-instead-mourning> [accessed 27 January 2020]).

³ See Nicole Curato, ed. *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte’s Early Presidency* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2016); Nicole Curato, “Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope: Populism and Duterte’s Rise to Power,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 3 (2016):91-109; Nicole Curato, “Flirting with Authoritarian Fantasies? Rodrigo Duterte and the New Terms of Philippine Populism,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47/1 (2017): 142-53.

⁴ Paul Jeffrey, “Detox, Rehab, Food: Parish Works to Fight Philippine Drug Problem,” 6 September 2016, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/parish/detox-rehab-food-parish->

members of the Catholic Church, including ordained ministers, who consider the president's iron-fist approach as necessary. Many even consider it as a fight against evil and as a defense of the innocent. Despite the many statements of the hierarchy against the abuses of the Duterte administration, the president's approval and trust ratings remain excellent⁵ and in spite of the obvious abuses committed in the drug-campaign,⁶ it remains popular among the citizenry.⁷

This paper focuses on the statements of Duterte against the church, the responses issued by the CBCP to the administration and the drug war, and the challenges with which Duterte's presidency confront the church. In

works-fight-philippine-drug-problem (accessed 28 January 2020); Catholic News Agency, "Church in Philippines Responds to Drug War with Rehab Centers," 27 October 2016, <https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2016/10/church-philippines-responds-drug-war-rehab-centers/> (accessed 28 January 2020). Under the leadership of Bishop Virgilio David, the Diocese of Kalookan started Task Force Salubong, its drug rehabilitation program, in October 2016, see <https://dioceseofkalookan.ph/pastoral-program/salubong-rehabilitation-program-for-drug-defendants/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁵ "Pulse Asia: Duterte's Approval, Trust Ratings Surge in December 2019," 23 December 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/247683-duterte-trust-approval-ratings-pulse-asia-survey-december-2019> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁶ Jodesz Gavilan, "Big Majority of Filipinos See 'Many' Human Rights Abuses in Duterte's Drug War – SWS," 13 January 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/249142-filipinos-see-many-human-rights-abuses-drug-war-sws-survey-december-2019> (accessed 28 January 2020). See Philippine Human Rights Information Center, *The Killing State: 2019 Philippine Human Rights Situationer*, January 2020, <https://www.philrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/WP-Copy-2019-HR-Sit.pdf> (accessed 7 February 2020).

⁷ Regine Cabato, "Thousands Dead. Police Accused of Criminal Acts. Yet Duterte's Drug War Is Widely Popular," 23 October 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/thousands-dead-police-accused-of-criminal-acts-yet-dutertes-drug-war-is-wildly-popular/2019/10/23/4fdb542a-f494-11e9-b2d2-1f37c9d82dbb_story.html (accessed 28 January 2020).

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the first part, I give examples of the president's criticisms of the church hierarchy and the church's teachings, and his responses to perceived attacks from local church leaders of his person, actions, and policies. The examples that I provide are meant to be representative and not exhaustive of all that Duterte has said against the Catholic Church. Second, I make a survey of the statements of the CBCP prior to and after the election of Duterte. Many of them are in reaction to the president's statements while others are in response to government policies that are deemed inimical to the people's well-being. Nevertheless, it is apparent that there is a disconnect between the statements of the bishops and the ordinary Filipino's support for Duterte. This is why, in the third part, I argue that the church's leadership, both the clergy and the lay, needs to grapple seriously with this difference. Such a "struggle" demands *ad intra* more convincing efforts on the part of the local church to truly listen to the aspirations of the people who appear to see Duterte as their "savior." Since his style of governance has been divisive, the Catholic Church is called to become a "field hospital," an instrument of healing of a fractured Philippine society. It is only when the local church performs its faith in this regard that it will become credible in denouncing the abuses that are committed by the present administration and in the process, help in healing the nation.

Duterte's Statements about the Church, Its Teachings and Its Leaders

When he assumed the office of the president, Duterte showed that he was not afraid to confront the church and from the very beginning, did not bother hiding his disdain for its leaders, its (lack of) witnessing and its teachings. Perhaps, his antipathy toward the church was due to his

claim that he was molested by a priest in a Catholic school where he studied as a young boy. In addition, when Duterte was mayor of Davao City, his most vocal critic was a priest.⁸ And then, even before the 2016 presidential elections, the CBCP released a statement which arguably was an exhortation to the electorate not to vote for him. It would seem that Duterte himself interpreted that as an attack against him: “*Ang hindi kasi nakuha ng Simbahan, napaka-bobo naman kasi itong Katoliko. Tapos ngayon, nagsabi pa, hindi daw sila nagkampanya. Eh ‘yung tatlong bishop na nagsalita against me?*”⁹ Of course, politically and historically, the institutional church has been the only institution that has been able to stand toe-to-toe with the state so to speak. For an authoritarian like Duterte,¹⁰ he would like nothing more than to discredit the church and diminish its influence on the nation.

What has Duterte said about the church and how has he reacted to its criticisms of his policies, particularly his pet project, the “war on drugs”? It would appear that his criticisms of the church focus on the credibility of the church as an institution, the credibility of its leaders and the intelligibility of its teachings.¹¹ Each point would be

⁸ See, the blog entries of Fr. Amado Picardal, CSsR, “Web Journal of Fr. Amado Picardal, CSsR,” <http://amadopicardal.blogspot.com/> (accessed 26 January 2020).

⁹ Jing Castañeda, “Clergy Not Cowed by Duterte’s Attacks,” 24 May 2016, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/halalan2016/nation/05/24/16/clergy-not-cowed-by-dutertes-attacks> (accessed 27 May 2016).

¹⁰ See, Walden Bello, “Rodrigo Duterte: A Fascist Original,” 9 February 2017, <https://www.cetri.be/Rodrigo-Duterte-A-Fascist-Original?lang=fr> (accessed 26 January 2020).

¹¹ In their study of 13 of Duterte’s speeches against the Catholic Church in 2017, Chua, Labiste, and Rara of the College of Mass Communication of UP Diliman argue that Duterte’s attacks can be classified as “hate speech,” which is defined as “‘abusive, insulting and demeaning and stirs up hatred vs. individuals or groups.’ The intention of such language is to attack the dignity as well as

elaborated in what follows.

Duterte is a person of contradictions. On one hand, he has professed respect for the church but on the other hand, he could not help himself but criticize the Catholic Church, opinions which betray his own profession of respect. There was time that he claimed that he was no longer a Catholic but at another time, said that he was one. At the heart of Duterte's dislike and even hostility toward the church is his view that the Catholic Church is "the most hypocritical institution in the Philippines."¹² For instance, when he won the May 2016 presidential elections but still has to be sworn in as president, he said: "*Ito lang mga obispo na sobrang yabang, akala mo, marunong. Sabi n'ya, we the church will criticize immorality. How about you? Why have you not criticized yourself or ask pardon from the Filipino people?*"¹³ He also said: "*Naka-gold pa. 'Yung inuman, 'yung mga gold. Karaming mura na baso diyan sa Quiapo, pa-gold-gold*

dehumanize and diminish its targets" ("Digong vs the Catholic Church," 14 December 2017, <https://upd.edu.ph/digong-vs-the-catholic-church/> [accessed 28 January 2020]). When the target, which in this case is the church, is dehumanized, it makes it much easier for state actors to subjugate, silence and repress it. The same could be argued about the situation of suspected criminals in the drug campaign. If and when suspects are not recognized as human beings with inherent dignity and rights, it makes it easier on the part of others to punish and kill them. This will partly explain why in spite of the lack of due process in the "war on drugs," there has been no uproar about it. The general populace have accepted the narrative that they are less than human and that they deserve what is happening to them.

¹² "Philippine Leader Duterte Vents at 'Hypocritical' Catholic Church," 22 May 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-politics-church/philippine-leader-duterte-vents-at-hypocritical-catholic-church-idUSKCN0YD00H> (accessed 27 January 2020).

¹³ "Duterte: Join the 'Iglesia ni Duterte,'" 24 May 2016, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/nation/05/23/16/duterte-join-the-iglesia-ni-duterte> (accessed 27 January 2020).

pa kayo. Tapos tayo pa ang mag-gastos. Unang koleksyon, 'yung pangalawang [koleksyon], para 'yun sa pamilya nila, maniwala ka."¹⁴ While he said that priests have their own families, Duterte also claimed that 90% of priests are homosexuals.¹⁵

He also said that he had a different concept of God: "It's only one God, God the Father. He's not even the father. He's God, period."¹⁶ He even joked about having a new religion, "Iglesia ni Rodrigo."¹⁷ This was not the first time that he made a reference to that. Prior to assuming the presidency, he already told people to join the "Iglesia ni Duterte." He said that his "religion does not limit anything. All you can do is... Do not believe in hell. When you die you are just a piece of carcass and that's it. There's no more hell – about hell – burning in hell? You cannot burn a soul."¹⁸ It is apparent that he considers his criticisms of the church in light of the country's national hero, Jose Rizal: "*Ang tingin ko kay Rizal, talagang god* (I think of Rizal as a god), he's my hero and others also, Filipinos who died for the nation. Rizal stood against the

¹⁴ Nestor Corales, "Duterte's Attack vs the Catholic Church Goes On, Tells Prelates to Shape Up," 6 December 2018, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1060778/duterte-attacks-vs-catholic-church-goes-on-tells-prelates-to-shape-up> (accessed 27 January 2020).

¹⁵ Christina Mendez, "90% of Priests Are Gay," 7 December 2018, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2018/12/07/1874888/duterte-90-priests-are-gay> (accessed 27 January 2020).

¹⁶ Pia Gutierrez, "'Most Hypocritical Institution': Duterte Blasts Church Anew," 15 August 2018, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/08/15/18/most-hypocritical-institution-duterte-blasts-church-anew> (accessed 27 January 2020).

¹⁷ "Duterte Jokes about Creating Iglesia ni Rodrigo," 7 March 2019, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x73nl6z> (accessed 27 January 2020).

¹⁸ Virgil Lopez, "Duterte Hits Church Anew, Slams Veneration of Saints Practice," 15 August 2018, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/664205/duterte-hits-church-anew-slams-veneration-of-saints-practice/story/> (accessed 27 January 2020).

Roman Catholic Church. He died for our country, he was shot. And then these Filipinos will go to the church and kneel down.”¹⁹

In his mind, the Christian God is “stupid” with reference to the story of creation in Genesis: “Who is this stupid God? *Estupido talaga itong p***** i** kung ganun*. You created some --- something perfect and then you think of an event that would tempt and destroy the quality of your work.”²⁰ His reasoning goes this way: “Eve ate it and then woke Adam up and asked him to eat it as well. Adam ate it and then malice was born.... Now all of us are born with an original sin. What is the original sin? Was it the first kiss? What was the sin? Why is it original. You're still in your mother's womb and yet to already have a sin.”²¹ He could not accept the doctrine of original sin: “*Eh 'yan ang hindi ko matanggap*. Very stupid proposition. *Anong kasalanan?* Original sin, *tapos i-baptize ka*. *Basain pa 'yang ulo mo ng tubig*. *Maniwala ka niyang pari na 'yan*.”²² For Duterte, “How can you rationalize a God? *Maniwala ka* (Would you believe in one?).”²³ He also criticized the traditional Catholic practice of honoring saints and remembering their departed loved ones: “*Bakit naman, sa bagay ito, tarantado talaga itong mga Katoliko, puta*. *Bakit may All Souls' Day tapos may All Saints' Day*. *Hindi nga natin alam 'yung mga santo, na kung sino mga gago na 'yun, mga lasenggo*.”²⁴ Duterte also attacked the church's

¹⁹ “Duterte Deifies Rizal for Standing Up to Catholic Church,” 8 June 2019, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/06/08/19/duterte-deifies-rizal-for-standing-up-to-catholic-church> (accessed 27 January 2020).

²⁰ “Duterte Asks: ‘Who Is This Stupid God?’,” 23 June 2018, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/06/23/18/duterte-asks-who-is-this-stupid-god> (accessed 27 January 2020).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Pia Rañada, “On All Saints' Day, Duterte Calls Saints ‘Gago,

doctrine on the Trinity: “*Magdasal ka na sa isang Diyos, magdasal ka pa dito sa santong yawa. Isa lang ang Diyos.* (You’re already praying at one God, then you’re going to pray at these cursed saints. There’s only one God.) There’s only one God, period. You cannot divide God into 3, that’s silly.”²⁵ He then continued: “*Yong Diyos mo, pinako sa krus. Tangina. Nakakawala ng bilib. Ako ang Diyos, tapos ipako mo ako? Putangina. Sabihin ko, ‘Lightning, ubusin mo ito. Sunugin mo lahat ng mga erehes’.*”²⁶ In another instance, Duterte stated in response to those who criticize his statements about the church’s doctrine:

Why do you get mad if I hit your god? God is what you conceive him to be. We all have different gods.... They said god will put me in hell. That’s crazy. My god has no heaven or hell. Do you think god is stupid to create hell? What’s my sin? Womanizing? God is all forgiving. God does not know how to put people in hell... Even purgatory is not true. There is heaven, but do not believe that St. Peter guards the gates.²⁷

Duterte’s non-belief in hell would explain an earlier statement that he made: “What I don’t like really is ‘*yun bang takutin ka. Pagka maliit pa tayo, magpunta tayo ng impiyerno, magpunta tayo ng impiyerno, kung ano man*

Drunkards’,” 2 November 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/215767-duterte-call-saints-gago-drunkards-november-1-2018> (accessed 27 January 2020).

²⁵ Mara Cepeda, “Duterte Says Christian Belief in Trinity Is ‘Silly,’” 29 December 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/219912-duterte-speech-christian-belief-trinity-silly> (accessed 27 January 2020).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ronald Reyes, “Iglesia ni Duterte? Believe in it – Rody,” 3 July 2018, <https://manilastandard.net/news/top-stories/269540/iglesia-ni-duterte-believe-in-it-rody.html> (accessed 27 January 2020).

*sunugin ng impiyerno na.*²⁸ However, it appears that he is actually confused about heaven and hell:

Me, I have my own God? God who is all-knowing, who's kind. God who does not create hell, does not create heaven. He did not create human beings just to be thrown to hell or to enjoy heaven. My God says that you will live in a – any place where somewhere in the universe. Maybe that's heaven. Hell, maybe a... I don't know. You don't stop moving. You are... There's no kind – there's no clear punishment actually. But hell is a... You say that something unpleasant for the human soul. *Wala pa talaga tayong nakapunta doon. Pero 'yung good and evil totoo 'yan.*²⁹

With regard to the church's opposition to the revival of death penalty, Duterte said it is based on the assumption that there is a god who alone “is allowed to kill”: “...what if there is no God?” He went to question this God: “So, where is now God when a one-year-old baby, 18-month-old baby is taken from the mother's arms, brought under a jeep and raped and killed. So where is God?”³⁰ He proceeded ask a question that has been asked by many a believer: “So where is God? My God, where are you? I believe in God but that is my perpetual question to him. Where were you when we needed you?”³¹ Not

²⁸ Pia Rañada, “Duterte: Come Join ‘Iglesia ni Duterte,’” 7 September 2016, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/145454-iglesia-ni-duterte> (accessed 27 January 2020).

²⁹ Ted Cordero, “Duterte Sees Rizal as ‘God,’ Laments Arrival of Christianity in PHL,” 8 June 2019, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/697050/duterte-sees-rizal-as-god-laments-arrival-of-christianity-in-phl/story/> (accessed 27 January 2020).

³⁰ Tricia Macas, “Duterte Takes on God: Where Are You When a Baby Is Raped and Killed?,” 26 September 2016, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/582763/duterte-takes-on-god-where-are-you-when-a-baby-is-raaped-and-killed/story/> (accessed 27 January 2020).

³¹ Macas, “Duterte Takes on God.”

surprisingly, he continued, “It is not enough to say that at the end of the world he shall come to judge the living and the dead. What will be the purpose of all of that if the harms and sorrows have already been inflicted upon the human race?”³²

With respect to the ongoing plans and preparations of the Catholic hierarchy for celebration of the 500th anniversary of the coming of Catholicism in the country, Duterte had this to say:

*Anong plano? Wala akong plano. Why should I celebrate the coming of imperialism to my country? They brought religion, fine. But you didn’t have to subjugate my country and made my fellow brothers and sisters under the yoke of imperialism for 400 years. Kaya ‘yan, kita mo. They’re being treated as basura.”*³³

This is why he considered Rizal as “*talagang* god” and his “hero” and noted what he saw as an ironic situation: “Rizal stood against the Roman Catholic Church. He died for our country, he was shot. And then these Filipinos will go to the church and kneel down.”³⁴

Duterte also claimed that the Catholic Church thought wrongly that he would refrain from criticizing it for fear of losing the votes of Catholics. He said:

Kanus-a man ko namakak? Dili lang nila gusto akong baba sa Manila kay mobuga ko ug bastos, pero tinuod. (When did I lie? Hindi lang nila gusto dahil bastos akong magsalita, pero totoo.) Nagkamali lang sila sa akoa og kontra. Abi lang nila mohilom ko kay mahadlok ko mawad-an og boto sa mga Katoliko. (Nagkamali lang sila sa pagkalaban sa akin. Akala nila hindi ako magsasalita dahil natatakot ako na

³² Ibid.

³³ Cordero, “Duterte Sees Rizal as ‘God’.”

³⁴ Ibid.

*mawalan ng boto mula sa mga Katoliko.)*³⁵

In the speech during national Baptist Day that was mentioned in the beginning, he considers himself as the first politician to successfully carry on a battle against the church:

... maybe it's good to bullshit the bishops. It might make you win. Take it from my experience.... You'd notice that they're no longer complaining even if I said bullshit *'yang...*they don't respond anymore. That is how to win the war against the Catholic Church. All you have to say is *'Putangina ninyo,' panalo ka na.*³⁶

With regard to the bishops who were critical of his “war on drugs,” Duterte said: “*Itong mga obispo ninyo, patayin ninyo. Walang silbi iyang mga gagong iyan.* All they do is criticize.”³⁷ He told priests, “don’t meddle too much.”³⁸ For him, the church has to correct itself first before it can criticize. “If not I will really be their enemy

³⁵ “When Did I Lie?” Duterte on Church Sex Abuse Cases,” 11 May 2019, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/05/11/19/when-did-i-lie-duterte-on-church-sex-abuse-cases> (accessed 27 January 2020). While Duterte criticizes the colonization of the Philippines by Spain, it appears that he is allowing a regional power, China, to trample on Philippine sovereignty (see Ted Regencia, “Duterte Finds a Friend in China but Critics Cry Treason,” 12 July 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/duterte-finds-friend-china-critics-cry-treason-190712064055601.html> [accessed 27 January 2020]).”

³⁶ Esguerra, “Duterte Lambasts Catholic Church Anew.”

³⁷ Dharel Placido, “Patayin Ninyo: Duterte Says Bishops Better off Dead,” 5 December 2018, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/12/05/18/patayin-ninyo-duterte-says-bishops-better-off-dead> (accessed 27 January 2020).

³⁸ Cecilia Yap, “Duterte Steps Up Attacks on Catholic Church, Priests,” 29 December 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-12-29/duterte-steps-up-attacks-on-catholic-church-meddling-priests> (accessed 27 January 2020).

and I will continue to attack them.”³⁹ In another speech, he said: “You know what, mother f*cker, there’s a war. I have declared war. If not, my country will lose. You priests, you won’t do anything... forgiveness, forgiveness, will forgiveness be enough?”⁴⁰ He also stated:

*Putangina kayong pari dapat nga kayo ang pagbabarilin eh... Putangina mamatay na kayong lahat, wala akong pakialam. (You sons of bitches, you priests, you should be shot... You sons of bitches, you all should die, I don't care.) Wala akong pakialam kung mamatay kayong lahat, maluwanag pa ang ating cemetery. Tangina, making me feel guilty about my – kayo ang nauna. (I don't care if you all die, our cemeteries are still spacious. Sons of bitches, making me feel guilty about my – you started it.)*⁴¹

He then went on to issue a seeming threat: “*Magdahan-dahan kayong mga Katoliko* (You Catholics better slow down). Better shut up or else. Extrajudicial killing? Prove it. But killing? Yes, destroy my country and I will kill you.”⁴² Perhaps, the most blatant attempt on the part of the administration to silence its critics in the church is the filing of sedition and other criminal charges not only against the members of the political opposition but also against four bishops and three priests who have been very vocal in their opposition of the “war on drugs.”⁴³

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ “Duterte Slams Catholic Church Anew during Holy Week, Says Forgiveness not Enough,” 16 April 2019, <https://news.yahoo.com/duterte-slams-catholic-church-anew-034459702.html> (accessed 27 January 2020).

⁴¹ Pia Rañada, “Duterte Says Priests Should Be Shot,” 14 March 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/225762-duterte-says-priests-should-be-shot> (accessed 27 January 2020).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Elmor Santos, “CBCP head: Sedition Case vs. Bishops Unbelievable,” 20 July 2019, <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2019/>

Not surprisingly, the government has denied that it has anything to do with the filing of the charges.⁴⁴

Undoubtedly, Duterte uses very colorful language in his tirades against the Catholic Church. They manifest his own personal issues against the church, his misunderstandings of church teachings and his inability to take criticisms in stride. It appears that he is unmindful of the effects and impact of his words as the chief executive against the church and the possible repercussions that may result because of them, especially if they are acted upon by his most fanatic followers. His remarks about the church and its failings actually are in a way reflective, in my opinion, of the ordinary person's disgruntlement with the church. This explains why many Catholics are not bothered by his statements and that many of them have bought his narrative that what he has been doing is necessary in order to save the country.

The Church's Responses to Duterte

The most pressing problem in the Philippines for Duterte is the prevalence and use of illegal drugs. He claimed that there were between 3-4 million drug users although the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency pegged the number at 1.8 million. The fear of Duterte was that the country would turn into a narco-state and during the campaign season, he promised that he would end the scourge of drugs in 3-6 months, a promise left undelivered 4 years into his presidency. He has

7/20/CBCP-head--Sedition-case-vs.-bishops-unbelievable-.html? (accessed 27 January 2020).

⁴⁴ CNN Philippines Staff, "Palace Denies Hand in Sedition Raps vs. Robredo, Opposition Figures over Narco List Videos," 19 July 2019, <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2019/7/19/Malacanang-Bikoy-sedition-case-Robredo-opposition-narco-list.html> (accessed 27 January 2020). The charges have since been dropped.

embarked on a bloody “war on drugs” which has claimed the lives of thousands of suspected drug dependents and pushers, many, if not most, of whom are victims of extrajudicial killings by state actors.⁴⁵ For Reyes, Duterte’s message is clear: “criminals can be humiliated and killed in order to protect law abiding and god-fearing Filipinos.”⁴⁶ Duterte’s heavy-handed approach to drugs (and crime in general) and the human rights abuses associated with it serve as the backdrop of the ongoing conflict between the church and Duterte. In what follows, I focus on the statements of the CBCP as they relate to Duterte and his policies.

Just before the May 2016 national elections which catapulted him into the presidency, the CBCP issued a pastoral statement which acknowledged the “desire for change” on the part of the people but argued that it “could not take not the form of supporting a candidate whose speech and actions, whose plans and projects show scant regard for the rights of all, who has openly declared indifference if not dislike and disregard for the Church specially her moral teachings.”⁴⁷ This statement was an apparent reference to Duterte who at that time was leading in all the polls and seemed to be the likely winner. It must be remembered that the year before his election, Duterte criticized Pope Francis for causing a lot of traffic during his visit to the Philippines and that the reports of the killings in Davao City while he was still

⁴⁵ See the documentary of National Geographic, “Nightcrawlers: Truth Hides in the Darkness” (2019), an exposé of Duterte’s “war on drugs,” <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/films/the-nightcrawlers/#/>.

⁴⁶ Danilo Andres Reyes, “The Spectacle of Violence in Duterte’s ‘War on Drugs,’” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35/3 (2016): 112.

⁴⁷ CBCP, “Prophets of Truth, Servants of Unity,” 1 May 2016, <http://www.cbcnews.com/cbcnews/?p=76660> (accessed 28 January 2020).

mayor were becoming more known and worrisome. Ten days before he assumed the presidency and in response to the rise in the apparent killings of suspected criminals, the CBCP urged the police to follow due process and not to give up on anyone, “even if it be the blood of [the] one we suspect of crime.”⁴⁸

A few months after, on 16 September 2016, in response to killings in general but of suspected drug pushers and dependent-users in particular, the church expressed its solidarity with all those who suffered because of them. With specific reference to drug addicts, it stated,

Our hearts reach out in love and compassion to our sons and daughters suffering from drug dependence and addiction. Drug addicts are children of God equal in dignity with the sober ones. Drug addicts are sick brethren in need of healing deserving of new life. They are patients begging for recovery. They may have behaved as scum and rubbish but the saving of love of Jesus Christ is first and foremost for them. No man or woman is ever so unworthy of God’s love.⁴⁹

The bishops’ claim that addicts have dignity and are beloved of God was not popular among many of the supporters of the “war on drugs.” Again, do take note that Duterte said a month before this, in response to the critics of his “war on drugs”: “Crime against humanity? In the first place, I’d like to be frank with you: are they humans? What is your definition of a human being?”⁵⁰ It

⁴⁸ CBCP, “Pastoral Appeal to Our Law Enforcers,” 20 June 2016, <http://cbcponline.net/pastoral-appeal-to-our-law-enforcers/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁴⁹ CBCP, “I Will Turn Their Mourning Into Joy (Jeremiah 31:13),” 15 September 2016, <http://cbcponline.net/i-will-turn-their-mourning-into-joy-jeremiah-3113/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁵⁰ AFP, “Drug Users Aren’t Human, Says Philippines Duterte,” 28 August 2016, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/drug-users-arent-human->

was also in September 2016 when he said, “Hitler massacred three million Jews. Now there are three million drug addicts. I’d be happy to slaughter them.”⁵¹ In its 22 November 2016 pastoral letter, the CBCP acknowledged the efforts of the Duterte administration to respond to the issue of inequality and to the right of workers to their security of tenure. At the same time though, it echoed the concern of human rights activists in the country:

There can be no opposition between the campaign against drugs and the campaign for human rights. In fact, any opposition renders one or the other meaningless and fruitless. We seek the elimination of the drug trade and an end to the proliferation of habituating substances because they constitute a real threat to well-being. But we cannot be consistent in this resolve by denying some the right to their own well-being, fundamental to which is the right to life!⁵²

On 30 January 2017, the CBCP issued another pastoral letter which dealt solely with the “war on drugs.” At that time, around 7,000 people have been killed since the “war” started, according to Amnesty International. The CBCP letter began with a statement of concern:

We, your bishops, are deeply concerned due to many deaths and killings in the campaign against prohibited drugs. This traffic in illegal drugs needs to be stopped

says-philippines-duterte-110624632.html (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁵¹ Emily Rauhala, “Duterte: Hitler Killed Millions of Jews, I Will Kill Millions of Drug Addicts,” 29 September 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/09/29/duterte-hitler-killed-3-million-jews-i-will-kill-3-million-drug-dealers/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁵² CBCP, “Blessed Is the Nation Whose God Is the Lord! (Psalm 33:12),” 22 November 2016 (accessed 28 January 2020).

and overcome. But the solution does not lie in the killing of suspected drug users and pushers. We are concerned not only for those who have been killed. The situation of the families of those killed is also cause for concern. Their lives have only become worse. An Additional cause of concern is the reign of terror in many places of the poor. Many are killed not because of drugs. Those who kill them are not brought to account. An even greater cause of concern is the indifference of many to this kind of wrong. It is considered as normal, and, even worse, something that (according to them) needs to be done.⁵³

The letter continued: “We are one with many of our countrymen who want change. But change must be guided by truth and justice.”⁵⁴

In the face of the proliferation of fake news in social media, especially in Facebook, in which the “accomplishments” of Duterte were highlighted and in which his critics were denigrated, the CBCP on 21 June 2017 issued a pastoral exhortation against fake news.⁵⁵ It must be noted that since the campaign period for the presidency, the internet, particularly the social media platform, was “weaponized” by the handlers and supporters of Duterte in order to drum up and increase support for him and his policies.⁵⁶ Ironically, a few months after the pastoral

⁵³ CBCP, “For I Find No Pleasure in the Death of Anyone Who Dies – Oracle of the Lord God (Ezekiel 18:32),” 30 January 2017, <http://cbcponline.net/for-i-find-no-pleasure-in-the-death-of-anyone-who-dies-oracle-of-the-lord-god-ezekiel-1832/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ CBCP, “Consecrate Them in the Truth,” 21 June 2017, <http://cbcponline.net/consecrate-them-in-the-truth/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁵⁶ Maria A. Ressa, “Propaganda War: Weaponizing the Internet,” 3 October 2016, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/148007-propaganda-war-weaponizing-internet> (accessed 28 January 2020); Maria A. Ressa, “How Facebook Algorithms Impact Democracy,” 8 October.

letter, the CBCP itself was a victim of a fake news which claimed that the bishops regretted the deaths of the leaders of the ISIS-affiliated Maute group who planned and started the siege of Marawi, a city in southern Philippines.⁵⁷

On 7 September 2017, the CBCP issued a clarion call for the killings to stop and for healing to begin:

Because we Christians are heralds of a Gospel of Life there is no way that one can be a faithful Christian, let alone a fervent Catholic, and yet stay safely quiet in the face of these shocking attacks against human life. The very Gospel that the Church was founded to teach is a Gospel of Life. The Church must either be at the forefront of the intense and fervent struggle against a culture of death or the Church betrays Christ.⁵⁸

It went on to say:

When we label members of our society because of the offenses they commit—or that we impute rightly or wrongly against them—as “unsalvageable”, “irremediable”, “hopelessly perverse” or “irreparably

2016, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/148536-facebook-algorithms-impact-democracy> (accessed 28 January 2020); Chay F. Hofileña, “Fake Accounts, Manufactured Reality on Social Media,” 9 October 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/investigative/148347-fake-accounts-manufactured-reality-social-media> (accessed 28 January 2020); Lauren Etter, “What Happens When the Government Uses Facebook as a Weapon,” 7 December 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-12-07/how-rodrido-duterte-turned-facebook-into-a-weapon-with-a-little-help-from-facebook> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁵⁷ “CBCP Slams Fake News, Denies Mourning Hapilon, Maute Deaths,” 17 October 2017, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/10/17/17/cbcp-slams-fake-news-denies-mourning-hapilon-maute-deaths> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁵⁸ CBCP, “Lord Heal Our Land,” 12 September 2017, <http://cbcponline.net/lord-heal-our-land/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

damaged”, then it becomes all the easier for us to consent to their elimination if not to participate outright in their murder. We stand firmly against drugs and the death drugs have caused, but killing is not the solution of the problem.⁵⁹

It appealed for a period of mourning and prayers for all those who have been killed. In November 2017, the CBCP issued an invitation to begin the process of healing the divided nation, a 33-day period as the time to “Start the Healing.”

All the above CBCP statements were under the presidency of Archbishop Socrates Villegas. On January 2018, Archbishop Romulo Valles, the archbishop of Davao, Duterte’s hometown, assumed the CBCP’s presidency and it led to hopes that there would be a better relationship between the bishops and Duterte. In his first speech before 116th CBCP Plenary Assembly on 27 January 2018, among other points, Valles stated:

... I cannot help myself but mention this – the great opportunity for our local Churches – that those deep in addiction of illegal drugs can come to us, the Church, as a mother that welcomes them home, to their home, with open arms (see E.G. nos. 46-49). From my experience, they are most comfortable and confident to accept and bring themselves to be helped through the initiative and work and programs of the Church. It is an opportunity for us once again to proclaim that each and every life is sacred. Each and every life is to be loved and treasured. We do not want anybody to be killed.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Romulo Valles, “Message of CBCP President Archbishop Valles for the 116th Bishops’ Plenary Assembly,” 27 January 2018, <http://cbcpnews.net/cbcpnews/message-of-cbcp-president-archbishop-valles-for-the-116th-bishops-plenary-assembly/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

It was a theme that was consistent with the statements issued under the leadership of Villegas.

The CBCP was not concerned merely with the “war on drugs” but it was also worried that the efforts to amend the constitution had motives other than the common good. In response to the movement to amend the country’s presidential form of government to a federal one, the CBCP issued its pastoral guidelines about it. In the statement, it averred: “Amending the fundamental law of the land, so carefully crafted for the common good after years of dictatorship, requires widespread peoples’ participation and consultation, unity of vision, transparency, and relative serenity that allows for rational discussion and debate.”⁶¹ The CBCP went on to enunciate the principles that are important in determining the morality of the current efforts. “If the Constitution is to be revised at all, the process should lead to a greater defense and promotion of the above-mentioned moral values of human dignity and human rights, integrity and truth, participation and solidarity, and the common good.”⁶²

The CBCP also issued a statement of support to Sr. Patricia Fox, who was deported by the country’s Bureau of Immigration (BI) for ostensibly violating the stipulations of her visa. Duterte himself admitted that he was the one who ordered her investigated for being critical of his government: “You are a foreigner? Who are you? You do not have the right to criticize us. Do not insult us every

⁶¹ CBCP, “Pastoral Guidelines for Discerning the Moral Dimension of the Present-day Moves for Charter Change,” 29 January 2018, <http://cbcponline.net/pastoral-guidelines-for-discerning-the-moral-dimension-of-the-present-day-moves-for-charter-change/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁶² Ibid.

time you open your mouth.”⁶³ The CBCP believed

in the sincerity and dedication of Sr. Patricia to serve our people. We believe further that she is moved to serve our people by the love of Christ.... With a hope for a reconsideration regarding the BI's order after giving Sr. Patricia a chance to explain herself again, in a spirit of dialogue, could she be given a chance to stay and continue serving our people?⁶⁴

Not surprisingly, nothing happened to the pleading of the CBCP.

The CBCP also condemned the killings of two priests.⁶⁵ In response to criticisms that he was persecuting the church, Duterte claimed that he was actually protecting the church since the finding of the investigations “would not be good for the church”:

You want me to show it to the Catholic Church? I will show it to everybody. *Kung yan ang gusto nila, Ilabas ko na lahat, yung nauna na pari na namatay.* There's a matrix there...There seems to be something like an undercurrent going on.⁶⁶

⁶³ Felipe Villamor, “Rodrigo Duterte, Who Bristles at Foreign Critics, Has Begun Deporting Them,” 20 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/20/world/asia/rodrigo-duterte-australian-nun.html> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁶⁴ CBCP, “On the Recent Development: Sr. Patricia Fox, NDS Is Ordered to Leave the Country,” 26 April 2018, <https://www.rcam.org/index.php/component/k2/item/149-on-the-recent-development-sr-patricia-fox-nds-is-ordered-to-leave-the-country> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁶⁵ CBCP, “CBCP Statement on the Killing of Fr. Richmond Nilo,” 11 June 2018, <http://cbcponline.net/cbcp-statement-on-the-killing-of-fr-richmond-nilo/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁶⁶ CNN Philippines Staff, “Duterte: Findings on Priest Killings ‘May Not Be Good for Church’,” 20 June 2018, <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2018/06/20/president-rodrigo-duterte-priests-killing-catholic-church.html> (accessed 28 January 2020).

His “concern” for the church, however, seems to be only lip-service since in a speech before the Philippine Councilors’ League, he alleged that the reason why one of the priests was killed was because of the illicit affairs that he had, a claim that was condemned by the clergy since the slain priest could no longer defend himself from such allegations.⁶⁷

In a pastoral exhortation issued on 9 July 2018, the CBCP issued its most comprehensive statement to date as it is related to the church’s response to the “war on drugs” and its relationship to the Duterte administration. The CBCP acknowledged the difficulties that were being experienced by the church:

We do not fight our battles with guns and bullets. We do not seek protection from those who might wish to harm us by wearing bullet-proof vests, because the battles that we fight are spiritual. In these times of darkness, when there’s so much hatred and violence, when murder has become an almost daily occurrence, when people have gotten so used to exchanging insults and hurting words in the social media, we admonish the faithful to remain steadfast in our common vocation and mission to actively work for peace.” Given the vitriol of Duterte against the church, the bishops noted that this was nothing new: “We are not strangers to persecution and ridicule.”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Darryl John Esguerra, “Duterte’s Hate Story with the Church,” 21 July 2019, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1144135/dutertes-hate-story-with-the-church> (accessed 28 January 2020); Paterno Esmaquel II, “Murder Is Murder,’ Bishop Says as Duterte Hits Fr Mark Ventura,” 21 May 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/202972-duterte-mark-ventura-killing-cagayan-bishop-david> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁶⁸ CBCP, “Rejoice and Be Glad!,” 9 July 2018, <http://cbcponline.net/rejoice-and-be-glad/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

Significantly, the bishops also acknowledged the divisions within the church. While as we have seen, the CBCP has been consistent in its condemnation of the excesses of the “war on drugs,” there were many Catholics, even members of the clergy, who found no problem with it and would even justify the government’s approach. The church leaders admitted that their sufferings are nothing compared to that of the poor. Since the poor are at the receiving end of this “war,” the church must be at their side and defend them. To its critics, the church said: “We do recognise the constitutional provision of the separation of church and state, mainly in the sense of distinction of roles in society. When we speak out on certain issues, it is always from the perspective of faith and morals, especially the principles of social justice, never with any political or ideological agenda in mind.”⁶⁹

On 22 November 2018, Duterte publicly accused Bishop Pablo Virgilio David, a vocal critic of the “war of drugs,” of stealing money from the church in order to give it to his family: “*Ikaw, David, tumahimik ka ha. Sige ka lang hingi ng contribution diyan sa mga – saan ang pera ng mga tao? Ang gago sige lang hingi, may second collection pa.*”⁷⁰ David denied the president’s allegations: “I think he has confused me for someone else. You see, people who are sick sometimes do not know what they are talking about, so we should just bear with them.”⁷¹ In a statement, the CBCP president stated that he was “saddened and disturbed” by the recent statements

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ ABS-CBN News, “Bishop David on Duterte Tirade: Let’s Bear with Sick People,” 23 November 2018, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/11/23/18/bishop-david-on-duterte-tirade-lets-bear-with-sick-people> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁷¹ Ibid.

against David and asked for prayers for him.⁷² However, he did not ask Duterte to refrain from making unsubstantiated allegations.

In its 28 January 2019 pastoral letter, the CBCP expressed an awareness of a question that was in many people's minds: why were the bishops silent in the face of many disturbing issues?⁷³ With respect to the issue of illegal drugs and the government's efforts to eradicate it:

There are people who, perhaps out of concern for us, have warned us about being critical of the government's fight against illegal drugs. Perhaps we need to make ourselves clear about this issue. We are not against the government's efforts to fight illegal drugs. We do respect the fact that it is the government's duty to maintain law and order and to protect its citizens from lawless elements. We have long acknowledged that illegal drugs are a menace to society and that their easier victims are the poor. Like most other Filipinos we had high hopes that the government would truly flex some political will to be able to use the full force of the law in working against this terrible menace. It was when we started hearing of mostly poor people being brutally murdered on mere suspicion of being small-time drug users and peddlers while the big-time smugglers and drug lords went scot-free, that we started wondering about the direction this "drug war" was taking.⁷⁴

⁷² Jon Torres, "Philippine Bishops Stand by Prelate over Duterte Attacks," 30 November 2018, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/philippine-bishops-stand-by-prelate-over-duterte-attacks/83996> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁷³ For instance, see Walden Bello, "The Silent Church," 17 October 2016, <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/149397-silent-church> (28 January 2020); Amado Picardal, "The Silence of the Shepherds," 16 September 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/212093-silence-shepherds-amado-picardal> (28 January 2020).

⁷⁴ CBCP, "Conquering Evil with Good," 28 January 2019, <http://cbcponline.net/conquering-evil-with-good/> (28 January 2020).

In light of what the bishops started to hear, the bishops went on to affirm the sanctity of human life, the inherent dignity of each person, and the inviolability and inalienability of human rights in its teachings:

Our faith informs us that no human being in this world deserves to be treated as a “non-human”, not even the mentally ill, or those born with disabilities. This is consistent with our defense of the right to life even of the unborn, because we believe that all human beings are creatures in God’s image and likeness, imbued with an innate dignity. We also must consider the right to life of people who are brutally murdered just because they are suspected of being opponents of government, as well as those who are summarily executed by armed groups. Everyone in the civilized community of nations would agree that even those who may have committed criminal offenses should be treated in a humane way, even as justice demands that they be held accountable for their actions.⁷⁵

Just before the May 2019 elections, the CBCP urged the electorate to be “very discerning in their votes” since the election was crucial for the country’s future.⁷⁶ Individual bishops also issued their own pastoral letters in relation to the democratic exercise.⁷⁷ The CBCP and the bishops noted that there was a need for checks and balances in the government. Voters were encouraged to

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ CBCP, “Seek the Common Good,” 28 January 2019, <http://cbcponline.net/seek-the-common-good/> (28 January 2020).

⁷⁷ Socrates B. Villegas, “Don’t Leave God When You Vote,” 28 April 2019, <http://cbcponline.net/dont-leave-god-when-you-vote/> (28 January 2020); Antonio J. Ledesma, “Concerned Citizens for Good Governance,” 6 May 2019, <http://cbcponline.net/concerned-christian-citizens-for-good-governance/> (28 January 2020); Broderick Pabillo, “Prepare for the Elections,” 9 May 2019, <http://cbcponline.net/prepare-for-the-elections/> (28 January 2020).

vote for candidates who had the common good of the country in mind. At that point, it seemed more likely that the administration candidates for the senate would sweep the election. Hence, it might be argued that the CBCP's statement was an encouragement, if you will, that voters cast their vote for the opposition in the senate.

When sedition and other criminal charges were filed against four bishops, the president of the CBCP issued a statement in support of them on 19 July 2019. That such charges would be levelled against them is "beyond belief":

That they are accused of sedition and other criminal complaints is for me beyond belief. They may be perceived as very vocal and very critical in their pronouncements. But that they consciously worked promoting seditious activities and other related crimes, these honestly I cannot believe. These are individuals whose love for country and dedication for the welfare of our people I cannot doubt. Some of us may feel ill at ease in the way they publicly made known their opinions. But again, I say this, I cannot bring myself to believe that these bishops were involved in seditious activities; they are bishops whose sincerity, decency, respectfulness and love for our country and our people are beyond doubt.⁷⁸

Then, on 1 August 2019 as the judicial process against the accused bishops started, Valles invited Catholics to show solidarity with them in prayer.⁷⁹ The accused bishops released a joint statement in which they affirmed the following:

We renew our commitment to serve, to teach and to

⁷⁸ CBCP, "on the Accusation of Sedition against Some Bishops," 19 July 2019, <http://cbcponline.net/on-the-accusation-of-sedition-against-some-bishops/> (28 January 2020).

⁷⁹ CBCP, "Solidarity in Prayers," 1 August 2019, <http://cbcponline.net/solidarity-in-prayer/> (28 January 2020).

bless without relent, without repay. We will not allow this splinter from the cross of Christ to distract us from our mission, to dampen our zeal or to intimidate us.

This cross we carry now is nothing compared to the agony and passion of the Lord and the pains and aches of the poor. Our defense for human life and the sacredness of marriage remains. Our message of peace based on truth will not be perturbed. Our zeal for souls will not falter. Our mission is yet incomplete. We will not be discouraged.⁸⁰

As one can see, the CBCP whether acting as a collegial body or through its president has been consistent in its criticisms of government policies and actions which it deemed as contrary to the gospel and the Kingdom. In addition, individual bishops as pastors in their local churches have also issued such statements critical of the “war on drugs” and instituted practices that provide alternatives to the government’s violent approach. For example, under the initiative of Bishop David, “Stops the Killings, Start the Healing” tarpaulins were placed in every parish church of his diocese, Kalookan. It was a plea to the perpetrators of the killings that they cease sowing terror among the populace and instead, choose to be instruments of healing the trauma and the wounds caused by their violence. It was also an appeal to people to rediscover the humanity of those who have been demonized and to listen to the voice of God as God speaks in the depths of their conscience. Nevertheless, it is another question altogether if Catholics listen to their pastors and heed their message. I now turn to the question of the challenges that the reign of Duterte

⁸⁰ Teodoro C. Bacani, Jr., Honesto F. Ongtioco, Pablo Virgilio S. David and Socrates B. Villegas, “Fraternal Statement,” 7 September 2019, <http://cbcponline.net/fraternal-statement/> (28 January 2020).

presents before the church.

Towards Becoming a Field Hospital

Why is it that despite the many statements of the church against Duterte's problematic policies, his attacks against church leaders and the church's teachings, and the on-going killings of suspected drug users and pushers, he seems to remain popular among the vast majority of Filipinos?⁸¹ Evidently, the issuance of statements by the bishops is not enough. The drug rehabilitation programs, while indeed necessary, are more in reaction to the situation rather than preventive of it. The rise of Duterte⁸² seems to have brought out that which is not the best among Filipinos but the "the formless void and darkness [that] covered the face of the deep" (Gen 1,1 NRSV). In a sense, Duterte opened Pandora's box, unleashing forces, many of which he himself unintended and did not foresee, to put it charitably. He has tapped into his supporter's

⁸¹ His seeming popularity assumes that the surveys done by Pulse Asia and the Social Weather Station are truly reflective of the president's popularity and performance. It must be noted that there is a need to be critical of such surveys since there is evidence of herd mentality and partial disinformation linked to them (Tristan A. Canare, Ronald U. Mendoza, Leo M. Jaminola and Jurel K. Yap, "Unpacking Presidential Satisfaction: Insights from Survey Data on Philippine Presidents," *Ateneo School of Government Working Paper* 20-003, January 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/y9jwew5h> [accessed 29 January 2020]).

⁸² While Duterte projects an image of a being a man of the people, "a champion of the little guy," he was actually born into a life of privilege, being the son of the provincial governor. When he was young, he experienced violence at home, in the school and in the neighborhood, which would explain his strongman persona (see Richard C. Paddock, "Becoming Duterte: The Making of a Philippine Strongman," 21 March 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/21/world/asia/rodrigo-duterte-philippines-president-strongman.html> [accessed 5 February 2020]).

frustrations and fears⁸³ but unfortunately, that has led to the creation and acceptance of a culture that is violent, that lacks accountability for state actors, that has disregard for the truth, that is divisive and sows division, that is fanatical in its support of its leaders, that fails to truly engage in dialogue and is not respectful of other points of view, that is intolerant of dissent, and that relativizes respect for human dignity and human rights.⁸⁴ To say that this ongoing situation is worrisome is an understatement. When violence—virtual, physical and psychological—becomes institutionalized and acceptable to people and when the vulnerable are dehumanized by those in power and their supporters, a re-discovery of the dignity of each person and her or his rights, especially of the one who “fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead” (Lk 10,30 NRSV), becomes more difficult and Jesus’ call to show mercy to him or her like the Samaritan (see Lk 10,37) becomes less audible. It becomes much easier, just like what the Priest and the Levite did, to “pass by on the other side” (see Lk 10,31-32 NRSV).

It would also appear that *Juan de la Cruz* has simply

⁸³ Heydarian argues that one must understand the rise of Duterte in the context of the spread of populism all over the world. He further asserts rightly that in the case of the Philippines, Duterte and his handlers capitalized on people’s dissatisfaction with the post-Marcos “elite democracy” (Richard Javad Heydarian, *The Rise of Duterte: A Popular Revolt against Elite Democracy* [Singapore: Springer, 2018]).

⁸⁴ Tony La Viña is spot on when he says that the present dispensation makes its policy decisions “on the basis of politics and not scientific evidence.” This is evident in its “war on drugs” policy, its response to the Taal Volcano eruption and most recently, its (in)action (or lack of it) with regard to the 2019-nCoV. Unfortunately, such an approach will cause suffering on the part of ordinary people, particularly among the vulnerable ones of our society (Tony La Viña, “The Collapse of National Leadership,” *Eagle Eyes*, 1 February 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/tonylavs/posts/10158117548951967> [accessed 31 January 2020]).

accepted extra-judicial killings, the present day victims of “robbers” in the story of the Good Samaritan, as the “new normal.” Not surprisingly, Bishop David bemoans the indifference and apathy of people to all the killings:

There is a dangerous virus that is spreading faster than the Corona Virus. It is the virus of indifference. It has already infected millions in our country. Symptoms include a deadened conscience that is silently convinced that extrajudicial killing is probably the most effective solution to the problems of criminality and illegal drugs in our country.

We are paranoid about the Corona virus that has hardly infected a single Filipino, but we don’t even seem to care about this virus of indifference that has killed thousands already. Even the mainstream media have stopped featuring its victims in the news because even the latest cases are immediately treated as stale news if they are drug related. How can they be newsworthy if they are “more of the same”?⁸⁵

In many unfortunate ways, the Catholic faith has become domesticated, a phenomenon that would partly explain the people’s silence about and acceptance of state-sponsored killings. Nevertheless, that did not happen overnight. Even before the Duterte administration, many Catholics seem to prefer a faith that is comfortable and that does not question one’s sensitivities and social realities. The Catholic faith has apparently lost its radical element in the way many people, including the clergy, understand and have performed it. It would seem that Jesus’ message and example of love, justice and compassion are selectively enacted and Christians

⁸⁵ Pablo Virgilio David, “At Sino ang Aking Kapwa? (Who Is My Neighbor?) Addendum to My PCNE 7 Talk Yesterday: On the Infectious Virus of Indifference (January 29, 2020),” <https://www.facebook.com/pablovirgilio.david/posts/10215814981584545> (accessed 29 January 2020).

would rather listen to a prosperity “gospel” that does not question the prejudices and antipathy they have toward those who are “othered.” Such a domesticated kind of faith squares precisely with what Duterte and his handlers want to happen—the confinement of the Christian faith to one’s private life and the removal of its relevance in the public sphere. With the effective silencing of the fourth estate, especially those who are critical of his administration,⁸⁶ the only thing left is to relegate the church to irrelevance and hence, remove an institution that is capable of questioning him and his policies.

If the believing community is to be truly church, it must rediscover its prophetic voice in all of this. It cannot and must not remain silent and indifferent to human rights abuses and the failure of the government to be truly at the service of the people. Perhaps, the church needs to be reminded once again of the primary insight of the 1971 Synod of Bishops: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation

⁸⁶ See Jhoanna Ballaran, “In the Philippines, the Biggest Threat to Press Freedom Is Duterte,” 3 December 2019, <https://www.democratic-erosion.com/2019/12/03/in-the-philippines-the-biggest-threat-to-press-freedom-is-duterte/> (accessed 5 February 2020); Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, 3 May 2018, “Speak Truth to Power, Keep Power in Check,” <https://pcij.org/article/894/speak-truth-to-power-keep-power-in-check> (accessed 5 February 2020); Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, “The State of the Media, under Duterte,” 3 May 2019, <https://pcij.org/article/1596/the-state-of-philippine-media-under-duterte> (accessed 5 February 2020); Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, “The President and the Press: A Timeline of Hostilities against the Media,” 4 May 2019, <https://pcij.org/article/1599/the-president-and-the-press-br-a-timeline-of-hostilities-against-the-media> (accessed 5 February 2020).

from every oppressive situation.”⁸⁷ Given the plurality of voices in contemporary society, the church, especially its leaders, must necessarily be dialogical in its approach as it remains prophetic in its words and actions.⁸⁸ In a way, the Duterte presidency is a time of purification for the church, which in the history of the Philippines, easily gets caught up with the trappings of power, wealth, and success. As the church engages in prophetic dialogue, it will be “forced” to rely not on its diminished social capital but on the power of the Gospel as grace works in the lives of its leaders and members. It is precisely from a position of vulnerability that it will resist the empire and speak truth to power.

Duterte’s critique of church teachings on God, the Trinity, creation and the communion of saints is actually bad theology. More than anything, his attacks simply betray his lack of understanding of the things that he purported to criticize. Nevertheless, his kind of theology is reflective, I suspect, of the theology of many of his supporters (and even non-supporters). In this sense, what he has done was to simply surface the confusion among many Catholics about those teachings. Unintentionally, he verbalized it for them. It is not surprising then that many of the Catholic supporters of Duterte have used their faith in order to justify all the killings that have taken place.⁸⁹ While Duterte’s and his supporters’ theology is indeed theologically problematic, the reality is that they think in that manner and see

⁸⁷ 1971 Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*, <https://www.cctwincities.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Justicia-in-Mundo.pdf> (accessed 3 February 2020).

⁸⁸ See Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

⁸⁹ Jayeel Cornelio, “God Gave Us Duterte,” 3 July 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/206394-god-gave-us-duterte> (accessed 7 February 2020).

nothing wrong with Duterte's anti-illegal drugs campaign. In this regard, the church has its work cut it for itself. Given the total number of Filipino Catholics and the number of pastoral ministers, the church needs to institute sustainable and creative means through which people will come to truly know the basics of the Christian faith.

As the church engages in renewed catechesis, the more difficult task is the accompaniment of the victims of all the senseless violence. An example of an initiative to help those left-behind by the victims of extra-judicial killings is *SOW: Support for Widows and Orphans*, a joint project of Ina ng Lupang Pangako Parish, St. Vincent School of Theology and DePaul House.⁹⁰ It is a rehabilitation program for the families of the victims in Payatas, Quezon City. It offers psychosocial interventions and treatments to widows and orphans in order to heal the trauma brought about by witnessing their loved ones murdered. It also offers financial assistance for their basic needs, training for livelihood and education for children. Moreover, it networks with other organizations with the hope of empowering communities and of bringing to justice the perpetrators of the killings. The project is a modest attempt to respond to address the suffering brought about by the unabated killings. Similar initiatives must necessarily be a part of the church's accompaniment of the victims. In this regard, the church will fulfill Pope Francis' call on the church to become a "field hospital" and be a refuge for those who suffer and a source of their healing. It is only in this way, I think, that the church in the Philippines will become credible when it is truly in solidarity with those who are in the peripheries of Philippines, who in their moment of need are also abandoned by their neighbors, people who are in

⁹⁰ See *SOW: Support for Widows and Orphans*, <https://projectsow.weebly.com/> (accessed 29 January 2020).

a similar situation. Perhaps, when the church journeys with the victims of the “war on drugs” – when it allows itself to be vulnerable – it can little by little learn what it means to be truly the Church of the Poor and in its effort to become one with the marginalized, people will come to have faith in the church in spite of all its imperfections.

The church cannot afford to be simply reactive to the “new normal” in Philippine society. The present situation in which many Filipinos just accept the violence in the streets, in relationships, in politics and in the social media did not happen suddenly but is the confluence of issues and problems that were taken for granted. *The* question that confronts the church is: how can it form communities that are compassionate, inclusive, truthful and just? Needless to say, the church cannot do this task alone and needs to collaborate with other stakeholders in responding to the situation. As an initial but crucial step, it can begin to listen to Catholics who are supportive of Duterte and know first-hand from them the reasons why they support him. In this process, instead of alienating and dismissing them as “Dutertards,” the church will perhaps make them feel that they are listened to. I suspect that the church will learn a lot from them, especially as they share their frustrations and struggles, and their hopes and dreams for a better life. Dialogue in this regard will not be easy but the church must remain open to the Spirit as it works in the lives of those who political leanings are different. It will be a long process but it is only by doing so that the church may begin the process of healing the divisions in Philippine society. It must not choose to be an echo chamber but it must learn to listen to voices other than its own, even to sounds that contradict its principles and beliefs, similar to the experiences of health-care professionals as they listen to the “complaints” of their patients. It is only after listening to their stories that it can discern where the

Spirit is leading it at this point in the country's history.

The rise of Duterte has undoubtedly led to the loss of social capital on the part of the Catholic Church. This is due in part to his constant attacks against the institution and the apparent inability of the church to make a dent on his political fortune in spite of its many statements that are critical of his personal actions and government policies. However, the more important thing for the church is not whether it still holds sway over Philippine society but whether it remains faithful to its mission of building the Kingdom in today's world. One thing appears certain in all of this – the church is called to be an instrument of healing of Philippine society that is deeply divided because of political affiliations and orientations, and economic interests. It is only by being a neighbor – the one who acts with compassion and hence, with vulnerability – that the church will begin to become “field hospital,” open to all the victims of injustice and violence. Perhaps in doing so, it will be true to Pope Francis' vision of the church as:

... bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life.⁹¹

To become a field hospital should not be seen as a merely temporary and palliative solution but as a new

⁹¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 49.

way of being church – a church that is out in the streets
and that serves as a beacon of hope for all.

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