

Looking Forward, Looking Back: Framing the Interventions of the CBCP from the Perspective of Opinion Editorials

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Abstract: In March 2021, the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines marked the 500 years of the arrival of Christianity in the country. The quinentennial event sparked scholars to take a keen interest in how the Church of the future could look at the local level that, unlike in the years past, has become less receptive to its interventions in the public sphere. Using phenomenological inquiry, this study aimed to contribute to the discourse from the perspective of opinion editorials ($N=110$) (op-eds) from the online archives of three major national newspapers. A thematic content analysis of the op-eds surfaced three distinct but related themes describing the dynamics of the bishops' interventions, namely, the out of touch, out of line, and out of the depths syndromes of interventions in the public sphere. The results of this study have application potential for identifying the factors that could influence the reception or non-reception of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines' interventions in Philippine society with all its dynamic problems and challenges.

Keywords: Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines • Church • Content Analysis • Opinion Editorials • Public Sphere • Reception

Introduction

In March 2021, the Catholic Church in the Philippines marked the five hundred years of the arrival

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of Christianity in the country.¹ As its official theme would suggest, Church local leaders also proposed it as the reception of the Christian faith and a gift to be shared.² Regardless, the event did not come without controversy. Some quarters argue that the native's conversion to Christianity was made under duress.³ Others maintain that the conversion stemmed from the determination and zealousness of the missionaries to spread the faith.⁴ The Dominican historian Pablo Fernandez argued that the conquest and continuance of the Philippines under Spain was rather the work of the missionaries than that of the

¹ Throughout this article, 'Church' in uppercase will refer to the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines. More specifically, we will associate 'church' with the level of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) as the permanent organizational assembly of the Catholic bishops of the Philippines exercising together certain pastoral offices for the Christian faithful of their territory through apostolic plans, programs, and projects suited to the circumstances of time and place in accordance with law for the promotion of the greater good offered by the Church to all people. Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines. Preamble. Manila. Retrieved May 18, 2022, at <https://cbcponline.net/preamble-constitution/>.

² Reception, in this study, refers to the recognition of the Church's religious offer and message as a norm that is appropriate and useful for its life and mission in the two domains of *ad intra* and *ad extra*. See Yves Congar, "Reception as an Ecclesiological Reality," *Concilium*, 77 (1972): 43-68.

³ Barbara W. Andaya, "Christianity in Modern Southeast Asia." In *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian History*, 247-257 (Routledge, 2014); Jerzy Skrabania, "The Philippines under the Spanish and American Colonization (1565-1912). A Historical-political-religious Development. Part 1," *Nurt SVD* 148/2 (2020): 8-26.

⁴ Victor Aguilan, "Philippines' 500 years of Catholicism: A Protestant Perspective," (2020), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342465341_Philippines%27_500_years_of_Catholicism_a_Protestant_Perspective?channel=doi&linkId=5ef5741892851c52d6fdcedf&showFulltext=true (accessed 27 March 2021); Chansamone Saisayak, "Christianity in Southeast Asia," (2008), https://www.academia.edu/4781739/Southeast_Asia_Christianity (accessed 27 March 2021).

conquistadores.⁵ Controversy or not, the arrival made the Philippines one of only two predominantly Christian countries in Asia (East Timor being the other). In addition, around eight in ten Filipinos self-identify as Roman Catholics. However, this numerical achievement puts a constant burden of expectations on the Church and its members to be a transformative moral institution in contemporary Philippine society with all its dynamic challenges. There is also a growing concern about the present-day phenomenon of decreasing membership and waning influence in society.

The quincentennial event sparked religious scholars to ask how the Church of the future should adapt to a rapidly secularizing and pluralizing society that, unlike in the past, has become less receptive to organized religion.⁶ What are the interventions of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) in local society as part of its intent to perform a differentiated religious function in the public sphere? How has it fared in terms of the reception of its interventions in the public sphere of local society? What else must and can it do to improve their interventions and make their intended audience more receptive to them? These questions direct this present study.

For some time now, several church historians and theologians have documented almost five centuries of the reception of the institutional Church's interventions in Philippine society.⁷ Thus, this study need not go that

⁵ Pablo Fernandez, *History of the Church in the Philippines, 1521-1898* (Metro Manila, Philippines: National Book Store, 1979), 17.

⁶ In this study, Catholic Social Teaching (CST) refers to a body of teachings based on Christian faith and morals regarding how the Church and its members should act in all aspects of social life: economic, political, and cultural.

⁷ Julius Bautista, "Church and State in the Philippines: Tackling Life Issues in a 'Culture of Death'," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 25/1 (2010): 29-53; John J. Carroll, *Engaging*

route but instead answer its questions from the perspectives of exogenous observers: the opinion editorials (op-eds). In this respect, the reference to “the church of the future” does not mean an eschatological perspective on the church like in systematic theology but rather one of the five social institutions.⁸ They do not read omens but seek to analyze factors that could influence the reception or non-reception of its interventions in the public sphere.⁹ When taken collectively, they can offer a social scientific description of what is going on in the Church, where it might be heading, and where its efforts must be directed.¹⁰

Although no one is obliged to believe them, the op-eds serve a vital role as conduits for free and open discussion in a democratic society like the Philippines.¹¹ They represent a form of public opinion that is assumed to be reasoned commentaries on what is happening and what needs to be done on the salient societal issues of the day. For this study, we gathered their views on the CBCP’s interventions in the public sphere in the past ten years. The results of this study have application potential for identifying the factors that could spell the reception or non-reception of its interventions in the near future.

Society: The Sociologist in a War Zone (Quezon City, Philippines: Ateneo University Press, 2006), 227-246; Patricio N. Abinales, “Review Essay: Church and State and Church as State in the Philippines,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 28/2 (1996): 62-70.

⁸ Friedrich Schweitzer and Wolfgang Ilg, “Can Empirical Research Predict the Future of the Church? Theoretical Clarifications and Results from a Longitudinal Study,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 30/2 (2017): 198-217.

⁹ John Nery, “The Opposition’s Narrow, Viable Path,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (May 25, 2021): 5.

¹⁰ John Allen Jr., *The Future Church: How Ten Trends Revolutionize the Catholic Church* (New York: Image, 2009).

¹¹ Gregory P. Marchildon, Jennifer Y. Verma, and Noralou Roos, “Opinion Editorials: The Science and Art of Combining Evidence with Opinion,” *BMJ Evidence-Based Medicine* 18/5 (2013): 161-164.

Methodology

Design

We based this study on a thematic analysis of 110 op-eds published by three major national newspapers from 2010 to 2020. Content analysis is a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer categories based on explicit coding rules.¹² It is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data.

Subject and Study Site

The op-eds were selected via purposive sampling based on a single inclusion criterion that the op-eds were written by columnists, analysts, and academics, who were published weekly on the same dedicated page in the same newspaper from 2010 to 2020. Based on this criterion, we selected 38 op-eds writers (28 males and 10 females). Table 1 shows the characteristics of the op-eds according to some background variables.

Table 1. Distribution of selected newspaper op-eds

	Newspaper	Location	Website	Number of Op-eds coded	Number of columnists
1	Philippine Daily Inquirer	A	http://www.inquirer.net/	60	14
2	Rappler	B	http://rappler.com/	30	11
3	Manila Times	C	https://t.co/fOwN4FT8US?amp	20	13
			Total	110	38

¹² Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology* (London: Sage Publications, 2018).

Data Collection Procedure

We searched the online archives of three major national newspapers to collect data. The said newspapers were selected because they are the most accessible via their official archives. Next, we retrieved the op-eds published from 2010 to 2020 using a combination of four sets of keywords in English, such as “Catholic Church,” “Church and State,” “Church and Society,” and “religion and politics.” Our three-month archival search initially produced a total number of 170 op-eds. However, via purposive sampling, we selected 110 and discarded sixty non-weekly op-eds.

Data Analysis

The op-eds are the subjective views of the writers, but the manner of collecting and analyzing them is objective and systematic. First, we analyzed the transcripts of the op-eds using Delve, an online software that qualitative researchers use to process and analyze data from various methodologies such as grounded theory analysis, thematic analysis, narrative analysis, and more. Second, we read the transcripts and, via cool analysis, selected significant excerpts based on their relevance to the research questions. Third, we collected the codes with their selected extracts. Fourth, via warm analysis, we grouped the codes into themes. Fifth, the themes were evaluated and revised. Sixth, we constructed a narrative based on the identified themes that capture the op-ed’s perspectives of the reception or non-reception of the CBCP’s interventions in the public sphere from 2010 to 2020.

Findings

A thematic content analysis of the op-eds surfaced the central interventions of the church in three social issues

in the last ten years. These are: 1) the passage of the Reproductive Health Law in 2012; 2) the 2013 and 2016 national elections, and; 3) the so-called “war on drugs” (WODs). Table 2 shows a quantitative description of the codes earned by the three interventions.

Table 2. Distribution of data codes

Issues	Frequency	Percentage
Reproductive Health Law	522	62.0
2013 & 2016 elections	192	22.8
WODs	128	15.2
Total	842	100

The CBCP’s s interventions in local society occur in the public sphere, a space that provokes the public’s critical judgment, using its reason to exchange and discuss political ideas.¹³ As one of the key social institutions, the institutional Church, based on its self-understanding as a church-in-the-world, purports to perform a function in society as a social and moral institution. Expectedly, the lay members of the Church would rarely, if ever, question their perspectives and interventions in current social and political issues when said and done inside the Church. The bishops expect obedience and loyalty among their lay members. However, they become open to critical scrutiny by scholars, researchers, and commentators, particularly newspaper opinion editorial columnists, when said and done in the public sphere. The commentaries of the op-

¹³ See, Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 109-142 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1992).

eds are a cold reminder to the prelates that there are no sacred cows in the public sphere. This sentiment is expressed in the excerpt below:

The church, like all other institutions, should not be beyond public scrutiny. We hope that the men of God welcome this and consider it part of the new normal.

Unlike the administrations of Aquino, Ramos, Estrada, and Macapagal-Arroyo, the institutional Church must contend with Benigno S. Aquino III and Rodrigo Roa Duterte's administrations' political will to uphold the functional differentiation of religion and politics in the public sphere.¹⁴ Previous administrations avoided colliding with the church's hierarchy because it was widely perceived as a formidable societal force. This observation is expressed by the excerpt below:

For the first time in a generation, the church has faced two administrations firmly upholding secular policy. Former president Benigno Aquino proved unyielding in his support of reproductive health. President Duterte is frankly hostile to the clergy, pointedly speaking of pedophilia, which serves as a not-so-veiled warning against political interference by the hierarchy.

This is a clash of two powerful institutions, the presidency, and the church. So, in some ways, it is a 21st-century struggle between the church and the State over the country's destiny.

This study examines the three controversial issues in which the church intervened in the past ten years: the RH Bill of 2012, the national elections of 2013 and 2016, and the WODs from 2016 to 2020. We processed and

¹⁴ Rosalinda P. Ofreneo, "The Catholic Church in Philippine Politics," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 17/3 (1987): 320-338.

analyzed 110 op-eds through the lens of the reception or non-reception of the CBCP’s interventions in the public sphere from the perspectives of their authors.

Table 3. Characterization of the bishops’ interventions in the public sphere of Philippine society

<i>Church intervention syndromes</i>			
	Out of touch	Out of line	Out of the depths
Describe	The CBCP’s iron-clad mindset against the passage of the RH Bill into law and that RH is not the solution to the inequalities in the country.	Some senior members of the CBCP crossed the line in polls when they openly and aggressively endorsed and campaigned for anti-RH politicians and vilified their supporters.	The brutal and bloody WODs put the CBCP in a situation that proved quite challenging for them to cope with as they denounced it in defense of the rights of the poor and vulnerable members of society.
Interpret	To protect the family on the assumption that RH will destroy it, violate life,	To resurrect whatever was left of the institutional Church’s credibility	To exercise its right and duty to speak on the moral aspect of public issues,

	exploit the poor, and promote a contraceptive mentality and promiscuity.	and influence in the public sphere.	especially in promoting and defending human dignity and the right to life.
Outcomes	Despite the bishops' solid & aggressive opposition, the Philippine Congress enacted RH in December 2012.	The electoral results clearly showed that the bishops could not sway many of their members to vote against several RH supporters who still won convincingly against those endorsed by them.	The desired popular reception appeared not to have materialized as indicated by Mr. Duterte's still high approval and a satisfactory rating in surveys.

Looking back at the past

“Out of touch” Syndrome

In this study, it is interesting to note that the bishops’ intervention in the public sphere under President Benigno S. Aquino III (2010-2016) was driven by the latter’s firm policy to pass the RH Bill to curb the country's high population growth. Initially proposed in 1998 following the United Nations Conference on Family, RH was surprisingly the most significant contentious policy issue between Aquino and the prelates. What made

it also unexpected was that Aquino III was the son of former President Corazon C. Aquino, who was known as a devout Catholic and a close friend of some senior bishops of the time. This sentiment is further elaborated in the excerpt below:

The RH Bill passage was the only issue that preoccupied the church in the first three years of Aquino's administration.

Never had the church taken a hardline position on a public policy issue, which the vanguards of the faith insisted was more of a moral issue than the right of women to have control over their bodies and allowing couples the widest choice of planning their family size and spacing their pregnancies.

Aquino's government sought to provide natural and modern family planning methods through the RH bill. In the face of the bishops' strong opposition, he was said to have thrown the total weight of the government's resources behind the bill, including denying the pork barrel to members of Congress opposing it. This view is captured in the excerpts below:

Under the RH Law, as commonly known, the Philippine State can directly assist family planning by providing free contraceptives. Furthermore, the RH Law mandates a whole constellation of health services in addition to contraceptives. It also mandates services for women experiencing abuse.

The RH Law will lead to a significant slowdown in population growth—and hence fewer in poverty, fewer without jobs—and a dilution of the church's historical power, or perception of it, over the country's government.

The bishops and their supporters staunchly opposed the RH bill as contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church. On December 15, 2012, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) issued the pastoral letter, *Contraception is Corruption*, later read in all parishes.¹⁵ It was the church's strongest statement against the RH Bill, arguing that RH "will destroy the family, violate life, exploit the poor, and promote a contraceptive mentality and promiscuity." Against the government's belief that it was an anti-poverty measure, the bishops argued that RH is not the solution to the inequalities in the country, as expressed in this statement:

The RH Bill is not a measure or solution to this unjust reality. The RH Bill could worsen the situation as billions will be allotted for contraceptives, gadgets, and services. We firmly maintain our preaching that the RH Bill should be rejected.

On the other hand, the pro-RH groups argued that the RH bill is for women's rights, health, and informed choice. Thus, the then raging debate shifted from the RH bill as an anti-poverty measure to achieving gender equality and the control of women over their bodies. The women's groups asserted that gender equality could only be achieved if women could freely decide the number and spacing of their children. As verbalized,

The women's movement finally defeated the church in the fight over the RH Bill. It did this by reframing the

¹⁵ Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, "*Contraception is Corruption*" (2012), <https://cbcponline.net/contraception-is-corruption-a-cbcp-pastoral-letter-on-the-latest-decision-on-the-reproductive-health-bill/> [accessed May 27, 2020].

debate from population control to human rights; that is, women's right to reproductive health was presented as a fundamental human right.

Per records, in December 2012, after 14 years of a protracted battle between the church and government, the RH Bill finally became law despite the bishops' strenuous objections. The op-eds saw the passage as indicative of the extent to which politicians asserted their independence from the clerics' clout. There was also a broad consensus that the passage accentuated the Church's period of decline in society and government affairs. These observations are captured in the excerpts below:

Since then, the church's political influence has waned.

The victory of the RH bill will stand as a landmark in the history of church-state relations, demystified the Catholic Church and its iron grip on its politicians. The bishops will no longer enjoy favored status in future policy debates. They will be like any other advocate, claiming our leaders' attention.

To say the least, Catholic responses on RH reveal diversity in the Church in the Philippines.¹⁶ However, empirical evidence from survey groups showed high public support (71%) for the bill's passage across religious affiliations and ages. It also showed that the regularity in church attendance and trust in the church do not affect the RH Bill's support. Moreover, a survey of adolescents' attitudes toward RH showed that 56% believed that the church interferes in the government's affairs on RH and family planning issues. Arguing that the bishops were

¹⁶ David T. Buckley, "Catholicism's Democratic Dilemma: Varieties of Public Religion in the Philippines," *Philippine Studies Historical & Ethnographic Viewpoints* 62/3-4 (2014): 1.

increasingly out of touch with the ordinary members, many op-eds also have sharp words about their interference in governance and public policymaking. This sentiment is captured by the excerpts below:

RH is, however, not the church's best suit. Most of the faithful believe in it. Most of the faithful find it the most reasonable and moral thing on earth, stubborn like a mule, stood its ground against popular belief, against most of the people. The Anti-RH found little support from Filipino Catholics.

The Catholic hierarchy's single-minded opposition to the RH Law, it would seem, has led to the neglect of essential church reforms. These have to do with the lack of financial transparency and accountability; ill-prepared, often meaningless, and long-winded homilies; and the sexual indiscretions of clerics, in particular the long-term impact on the women and children—to cite just a few examples that have eroded the respect and trust in the church and led to the increasing alienation of the faithful.

More interestingly, the controversy led to the polarization of the Church and the emergence of informed lay Catholics who supported the bill and questioned the bishops' resistance to RH. Consequently, it also suggests that blind obedience to the bishops on the part of the educated adult members may no longer be presupposed as expressed in the excerpt below:

Mature Catholics are propelled by moral convictions rooted in their faith, not by marching orders from the bishops.

Aside from the perceived decline in their credibility as leaders, the op-eds argued that a secularizing and pluralizing society like the Philippines, facilitated by

rapid communication technology and social media, also accounts for the widespread non-reception of the bishops' anti-RH stance, as expressed in this statement below:

Technology or the digital revolution, specifically the Internet, social media, Facebook, and Twitter, made Filipinos acutely aware of the world (woke). Filipino Catholics have become more enlightened and will no longer accept doctrine blindly, and they want reason and science to go with it.

To sum up, the previous description of the bishops' single-minded opposition to the passing into law of the RH Bill is referred to in this study as *out of touch syndrome* with the sentiment and preference of ordinary members of the Church. We turn next to the second syndrome.

“Out of line” Syndrome

The bishops had customarily performed what Pope Benedict XVI called the Church's “religious tasks of forming consciences for faithful citizenship” during local and national elections by regularly issuing pastoral letters to educate Catholic voters.¹⁷ The 2013 and 2016 national elections are one of these. What was new in the said elections was that they, wittingly or unwittingly, had also put to a litmus test whatever was left of their once-vaunted political clout after the passage of the RH Law and the exposé on the luxurious vehicles donated to some senior bishops by a former president.¹⁸ In the May 2013 midterm elections, in an apparent act of

¹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, “Deus Caritas Est (God Is Love), (2006).

¹⁸ Frank Whaley, “Catholics Mobilize to Defeat Politicians who Backed Reproductive Health Law,” *New York Times* (Jan 2013), <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/30/world/asia/catholics-mobilize-after-setback-over-reproductive-law.html> [accessed May 25, 2020].

brinkmanship, some bishops openly campaigned for anti-RH politicians and vilified the bill's supporters, as expressed in the following excerpt:

For the church to put up gigantic tarpaulins on the walls of a cathedral, enumerating the names of senatorial candidates who must be elected or rejected solely based on how they voted on a piece of legislation deemed necessary by the church, is to take on a directly (and, I would also say, narrowly) political role.

However, the ensuing results clearly showed that the bishops could not sway many of their adult members to vote against several RH Law supporters who still won convincingly against those endorsed by them. The op-eds assumed that the results signaled the loss of their vaunted influence on politics and governance, as shown by the excerpt below:

Despite the black propaganda of the church against senatorial candidates supporting the Reproductive Health Law, a good number of them won the recently concluded midterm elections.

The results of the 2013 mid-term elections raised questions about the extent of the bishops' dwindling influence in the political arena. Further, they bolstered the impression that the so-called "Catholic vote" was more mythical than real. This sentiment is expressed in these words:

Although they were not conclusive, the results of the May 2013 elections further reinforced the long-held notion that a "Catholic vote" does not have an empirical basis.

The unexpected election of the former Mayor Rodrigo Roa Duterte as President in 2016 shattered whatever

expectation there was for a “Catholic vote” to become a reality.¹⁹ Once again, the bishops’ collective efforts to influence their members to vote for “competent and morally upright” candidates were ignored at the polls. The excerpt below captures this observation:

The effort to resurrect whatever was left of the church’s credibility and influence in the public sphere in the 2016 election received widespread repudiation from the electorate both locally and nationally. The church’s implicit and explicit message for candidates deemed suitable for the country did not exactly resonate with its Catholic flocks.

Thus, based on the results of the last two national elections, it is safe to say that the “Catholic vote” remains, as one bishop put it, “a pipe dream.” Nevertheless, there seems to be more to this electoral fallout. The op-eds expressed wonder why the bishops could not command their flock to vote as one like other block-voting religious groups and underscored in the excerpt below:

These days—in an increasingly secularized Philippines — Philippine Catholics do not like it when priests use the pulpit for any political message. The Catholics do not want their bishops and priests to tell them whom to vote for during elections.

Interestingly, some op-eds thought the myth of a “Catholic vote” is more a boon than a bane for the Church. They argued that it might prove beneficial to the church and society over the long haul. This sentiment is captured by the excerpt below:

¹⁹ Eleanor R. Dionisio, “Catholic Partisanship in the 2013 Elections: ‘Churchifying’ Democracy or Democratizing the Church,” *Philippine Sociological Review* 62 (2014): 11-40.

If 80 percent of the Catholic population were to vote like a herd, picking one set of candidates and damning the other sets, the Catholic vote would set up a mini caliphate, worse than voting unwisely. A Catholic vote would smother the essence and functioning of the country's democracy.

Summing up, and for purposes of describing the reception of the bishops' interventions in the 2013 and 2016 polls, the study labels them as collectively *out of line syndrome* of their attempt to influence the votes of their adult members. The third and final syndrome is discussed next.

“Out of the depths” Syndrome

Although he claims to be a baptized Catholic, Mr. Duterte has been at odds with the Catholic hierarchy even before he became President in 2016. For his supporters, some of whom were surprisingly Catholic prelates and priest themselves, Duterte must be “karma” which kicked the church right where it hurts: the scandals and sins from its past, as expressed in the excerpt below:

He accused them of hypocrisy, homosexuality, corruption, and child abuse and challenged the church to a “showdown.” These were all *argumentum ad hominem* intended to humiliate and shame the clerics using general accusations, without names or anyone.

The uneasy relationship between Mr. Duterte and the clergy grew tenser after the former mayor unexpectedly won the presidential election in 2016, despite the church campaign against him. From the start of his presidency, he attacked the institutional Church with his litany of unfounded claims—that some of the op-ed writers felt

bordered on sacrilege and heresy. This sentiment is captured in the statement below:

He calls the church “the most hypocritical institution” and accuses many priests of corruption and sexual misconduct,” thus quieting them.

After assuming the presidency in 2016, Duterte made his controversial WODs the flagship program of his administration, promising to eradicate illegal drugs within three to six months.²⁰ Newspapers reported that at least 6,000 low-income families were killed in the WODs from July 2016 to March 2019. Local and international groups denounced the killings as illegal and anti-poor. However, the op-eds expected and challenged the bishops to be at the forefront in the condemnation of drug-related killings. As verbalized,

In the face of significant abuse, the church needed to speak out.

Against the rising body count of those killed on mere suspicion of being drug users and pushers., the church certainly should raise its voice.

As a collegial body, the bishops initially fell deafeningly silent and uncharacteristically cautious in reacting to the many deaths and extrajudicial killings. Some op-eds felt that this was vastly different from the aggressive and fearless demeanor of their engagement against Aquino III and the RH Law. At the outset, only a few of them and marginal groups of clergies, religious, and laity dared to take on the challenge to speak against the killings. The foot-dragging of the bishops left the op-eds wondering, as expressed in the statement below:

²⁰ Adam A. Willis and Eloisa Lopez, “Church vs. State,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 95/2 (June 03, 2019): 38-55.

For the better part of Duterte's first six months, even our moral and spiritual leaders were reduced to silence.

Church leaders have spoken out. However, their declarations have been measured, mournful; indeed, muted in the extreme – have mainly been ignored.

However, in a moment of moral crisis, the bishops as a body could not *not* be involved.²¹ Thus, the CBCP, in their pastoral appeal dated January 30, 2017, denounced the “reign of terror in many places of poor” under the WODs of the Duterte government. The op-eds described the letter as its strongest statement against the drug-related killings, as expressed in the excerpt below:

The church has described Duterte's bloody campaign as “anti-poor” since it disproportionately targets slums and impoverished communities, where the bulk of extrajudicial killings have been reported.

The op-eds lauded the pastoral letter against the WODs. However, as one of them put it, the denunciation was not what many of them wanted or expected. They also suggested that the bishops should have taken it more vigorously, just like they did with Aquino III. Quite tellingly, several op-eds pointed out that the desired public reception appeared not to have materialized as indicated by Mr. Duterte's still high approval and satisfactory rates. This observation is captured in the statement below:

As for church criticism of the government's war on drugs, Duterte's high approval and satisfaction ratings show that public support is primarily unaffected by critical prelates and priests.

²¹ Carroll, *Engaging Society*, 219.

Given the contentious relationship between the bishops and Duterte, the question must be asked: What accounts for his aggressive stance against them? The op-eds provided reasons to make sense of the unprecedented struggle between the two sides as expressed by the statements below:

Duterte's war against the church is not just an emotional response but a calculated attack to 'delegitimize' the church's role as a political player.

It could be that Duterte is forcing religion into the private sphere, confining religion to the private sphere on individual belief and devotion.

The op-eds saw the clash as a blessing in disguise. For them, it allows the church to reflect and change some of its outmoded ways. They called on some bishops to make an honest introspection about serious missteps and overreach. As verbalized,

However, the church can turn the President's attacks into an opportunity for grace by reflecting on and correcting practices inconsistent with its ethics.

To sum up, and for purposes of asserting their right and duty to speak on the morality of the bloody WODs of the Duterte administration, the overall intervention of the bishops to defend its victims' rights to life and denounce extrajudicial killings of mostly the poor and the weak are collectively labeled in this study as *out of the depths syndrome* of the CBCP's courageous but calibrated denunciation of the so-called WODs.

Our summative assessment of the reception of the bishops' interventions is shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Summative assessment of reception of interventions

Issues	Number of snippets	Perceived Reception
Reproductive Health Law	20/522	Not received (1)
2013 & 2016 Elections	17/192	Not received (1)
WODs	25/128	Somewhat received (2)
Total	62/776 or 7.9%	4/15 or 2.6

Legend: 1: not received- 5: well-received

Looking forward to the church of the future

The op-eds also discussed the ramifications of their commentaries on the bishops’ three interventions that were not well received in the public sphere. As expressed in the excerpts below, they suggested that the bishops must own up to their missteps in the public sphere:

That (my) Church needed to be shaken. Too comfortable in its nominal majority, too preoccupied with its internal life and sexual and reproductive morality issues, and too removed from the poor, the church is now forced to confront its sins, its failures in evangelization, and the pluralism of Philippine society.

The Church will recover from all these declines in power and influence and closing the gaps is a lesson its members need to watch and learn.

Nonetheless, certain significant factors stood out in the op-ed’s suggestions in order to move forward to the

future. First, they suggested that the bishops must be in touch with the ongoing changes within the Church and Philippine society. Pope Francis himself called them to stay close to the marginalized and to be shepherds living with the smell of the sheep.²² Recognizing and adapting to these changes is critical in meeting future challenges. Some of these are internal such as a steady decline in the weekly church attendance of its adult members (from 64% in 1991 to 39% in 2019),²³ a continuing clamor for greater lay empowerment,²⁴ and external such as socioeconomic inequality and intergenerational shift.²⁵ The leaders of the Church will be driven by how they respond to the social changes that at times may appear detrimental to its self-understanding and perceived role in society:

The church cannot stand still while the rest of the world changes.

The Church must begin to accept a new world no longer dominated by religious faith and tradition, as seen in declining political arena influence. The religious

²² Pope Francis, "Priests should be shepherds living with the smell of the sheep," *The Catholic Telegraph* (March 28, 2013), <https://www.thecatholictelegraph.com/pope-francis-priests-should-be-shepherds-living-with-the-smell-of-the-sheep/13439>

²³ Social Weather Station "Social Weather Report Fourth Quarter December 13-16, 2019 National Survey," <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcldisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20180328121738> [accessed August 15, 2020].

²⁴ Vivencio O. Ballano, "The Catholic Laity, Clerical Sexual Abuse, and Married Priesthood: A Sociological Analysis of Vatican II's Lay Empowerment," *Cogent Social Sciences* 6/1 (2020): 1813438; Ruben C. Mendoza, "Growing 'to the Measure of the Full Stature of Christ' (Ephesians 4:13): The Laity in the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines," *Asia Journal of Theology* 30/2 (2016): 248-266.

²⁵ Jayeel S. Cornelio, *Being Catholic in the Contemporary Philippines: Young People Reinterpreting Religion* (London: Routledge, 2016).

message has lost its potency in persuading members to come to its leaders' biddings. For this reason, the Church should come to terms with modernity that spawned secularism and pluralism aided by social media and communication technology – indeed, its appeal primarily to the younger generation made religious belonging precarious.

From a sociological perspective, one may view the interventions and the changes in the public sphere as part of the ongoing dynamic interaction between religion and society—the interface as two systems each influencing and being influenced by the other. For better or worse, sociocultural changes have ramifications on religion, just as religious changes have equally important ramifications on society.²⁶ Furthermore, these present trends may also reflect the secularizing and pluralizing influence of a post-modernizing society facilitated and fueled by rapid communication technology. On the one hand, one aspect of secularization is when religious institutions are rendered less and less effective in addressing the changes and challenges of society, resulting in the taking over of such functions by secular institutions, particularly the government. On the other hand, there is a widespread realization that religious pluralism, defined as a commitment to recognize and understand others across perceived or claimed lines of religious difference, is the best path for proceeding into an admittedly uncertain future.²⁷

Second, the op-eds suggest that the bishops need dialogue and journey with their members. Using the biblical metaphor of the shepherd and sheep, Pope

²⁶ Ronald Johnstone, *Religion in Society: A Sociology of Religion*, (London: Routledge, 2015), 147-148.

²⁷ Courtney Bender and Pamela Edith Klassen, eds. *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement*, Vol. 8 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

Francis told the priests and bishops to go out and spend time with the people, not be closed off in their churches, to go and listen, and help and serve others.²⁸ This sentiment is expressed in the excerpt below:

What our country needs is not an imperious Church but consultative and compassionate. Church partners with government and civil society and makes constructive criticisms, not destructive comments coupled with epithets.

Demonstrate the validity of the church's teaching rather than issue condemnations. She must learn, humbly, patiently, to walk with its people again.

The op-eds also pointed out that the non-reception of the bishops' interventions was partly explained by their failure to communicate the message in a way that would resonate with their adult members. Benedict XVI holds that one of the pressing tasks confronting the Church and theology today is developing a contemporary catechumenate to make the essential elements of faith "marketable" in new ones.²⁹ Pope Francis has also spoken of his vision of synodality and a synodal church in terms of an inverted pyramid, and the need to make listening to the *sensus fidelium* a pervasive element at all levels in the life of the church *ad intra*.³⁰ Along the same vein, the op-eds argue that the church of the future must be a humble and listening church, as expressed in this excerpt below:

²⁸ Robin Gomes, "Pope to Priests: Be shepherds with the Smell of the Sheep," *Vatican News* (June 07, 2021), <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-06/pope-francis-priests-students-church-louis-french.html> [accessed 25 July 2021].

²⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 25-27.

³⁰ Ormond Rush, "Inverting the Pyramid: The Sensus Fidelium in a Synodal Church," *Theological Studies* 78/2 (2017): 299.

Nevertheless, how deep, and significant a threat to influence they will be in the future has a lot to do with how much they evolve—and how much their communication improves in the coming years.

If the Catholic Church wants to avoid a further and enduring institutional decline in the future, it will have to devise an appealing and fitting new and renewed religious offer.

From the perspective of the hermeneutical problem, the discourse on continuity and change has focused almost exclusively on what can and cannot change. Dillon pointed out that the Church must negotiate between the forces of tradition and those of change to maintain public relevance in a post-secular world.³¹ She argued that the Church must give a new voice and forge new directions in language, doctrinal thinking, and institutional practices that find greater resonance with the lived experiences of increasingly secularized Catholics and other citizens. Moreover, as T.H. Sanks argues, the Church will have a better chance of achieving a correct balance of continuity and change if it focuses more on the process of handing on (*tradere*) than on that which is handed (*tradita*).³² The Church's social teaching language and form must be adapted to resonate more with the contemporary people.³³ The early missionaries

³¹ Michele Dillon, *Post-Secular Catholicism: Relevance and Renewal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1-2.

³² T. Howland Sanks, "A Church that Can and Cannot Change: The Dynamics of Tradition," *Theological Studies* 76/2 (2015): 298-310. See, Ormond Rush, *The Reception of Doctrine Appropriates Hans Robert Jauss's Reception Aesthetics and Literary Hermeneutics*, Vol. 19 (Rome: Gregorian Biblical Book Shop, 1997).

³³ Catherine E. Clifford, "Pope Francis's Call for the Conversion of the Church in Our Time," in *Conversion and Church*, 147-177

made a heroic effort to transmit the faith to the natives by translating its teachings into the local language.³⁴ This aligns with what the CBCP itself said, albeit still with apparent reservation, in its pastoral letter, *Conquering Evil with Good*, and what the op-eds pointed out as a contributing factor to its waning influence in the public sphere:

We should find better and more appropriate ways of communicating the faith. Our preparation for celebrating the 500th year of Christianity in the Philippines could serve as a perfect opportunity to embark on a renewed integral evangelization in word and witness.

The third, and the change on which everything will hinge, is that the bishops' words will resonate more when accompanied by the witness of their life. In today's pluralizing and secularizing world, practice is more salient than belief; right living is more important than right believing, especially among the youth who are the present and future of the Church.³⁵ If the above changes work, the leaders must do much more than before. Several of the op-eds argued that the ordinary members would listen more to their social teachings when they see that they are being practiced, as expressed in this excerpt:

The criticism of the church boils down to this: the bishops have paid lip service to many of its teachings. The very much touted Natural Family Planning Program must be measurable, programmatic, and beyond mere rhetoric.

(Boston: Brill, 2016). See, Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 27.

³⁴ Fernandez, *History*, 435-443.

³⁵ Cornelio, *Being Catholic*, 18.

In hindsight, it is easy to believe that the perceived lack of concrete programs that can uplift the poor, like livelihood, education, and health programs, undermined whatever well-meaning pastoral letters they issue to their members. The practical implementation of social programs such as natural family planning and rehabilitation centers for drug victims depends to a large extent on the resources provided and the system of delivery in place.³⁶ The recent call of the bishops for laypeople to be more involved in the life and mission of the Church, especially in the political square, is consistent with this listening and humble approach to leadership. Couth argues that church leaders need to become motivational leaders to encourage the lay members to change and be more involved in the life and mission of the Church.³⁷

Limitations of the Study

Although the thematic content analysis adopted in this study revealed themes and insights into the op-ed's perspectives of the church's interventions in local society, the study has three limitations that must be considered in appreciating its findings. First, we discarded several equally relevant and insightful op-eds because they did not meet the selection criteria. They would have contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the said interventions in their ways. Second, the bishops as subjects of this paper were not heard to explain their side of the story in this exploratory study. Third, time and

³⁶ Noel Asiones, "Implementing A Natural Family Planning Program: The Case of the Metropolitan Archdiocese of Cagayan De Oro," *Scientia* 10/2: (2021): 54-70.

³⁷ Peter Coutts, *Choosing Changes: Motivating Churches to Face the Future* (Herndon, VA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

resources did not allow us to get into the latent content of the op-eds which could have enhanced the reliability and validity of the analysis. Despite these limitations, this thematic content analysis of how op-eds perceived the church's interventions in the public sphere shed light on the public interventions of bishops and on the factors that could influence the reception or non-reception of their social and moral teachings in Philippine society. Its findings also contribute to an alternative perspective of the dynamic relationship between religion and society based on their observed institutional functions in Philippine society.

Conclusion

Using thematic content analysis, this study aimed to contribute to the discourses on the theme of the Church of the future from the perspectives of the selected op-eds. It focused on its reasoned and critical commentaries on its three interventions in local society during the last decade—the RH Law in 2012, the national elections in 2013 and 2016, and the WODs from 2016 to 2020. The three central themes elicited from the data, *out of touch*, *out of line*, and *out of the depths* syndromes, suggest a pressing need for the leaders of the Church to reform in three specific areas of its institution that can enable them to generate actions suitable to the changing social conditions. How the prelates' reform in these areas will shape the Church of the future and the reception of their interventions in Philippine society.

The church members may rightfully expect a lot from their leaders. They looked upon them as men of God who are entrusted with divine authority that they are expected to obey for the sake of the Church and society at times unquestioningly. In recognition of their moral functions in society, especially during political and

economic crises, the bishops are considered the credible and trustworthy voice of reason and fundamental human values. Still, such expectations should also recognize that the bishops, as they admitted, are also flawed humans and thus subject to human dispositions and social conditions. What makes the bishops credible, despite occasional missteps, is their uncompromising and courageous promotion of the Church's social and moral teachings. Unafraid of alienating the civil authorities, they have remained a steady voice in a constantly changing public square and taking on their functionally differentiated role share in democratic politics.³⁸

Finally, based on these lessons and insights, what could the future Church be in Philippine society? It could be a leadership that is aware of the need for continual reform in how it communicates its social teachings in the public sphere; it is a church that is willing to listen more than teach, in mutual and respectful dialogue with all the stakeholders—above all, when all is said and done, it is ready to give witness to what they teach as an acceptable and transformative message in the public sphere.

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³⁸ Buckley, *Catholicism's Democratic Dilemma*, 5.

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