NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Philippines divided over reproductive health policies

Thomas C. Fox | Mar. 31, 2010

Philippine Liberal Party presidential candidate Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino leads a campaign rally in the town of ConcepciÛn, Tarlac province, North of Manila, Feb. 9. (AFP/Ted Aljibe)

MANILA, PHILIPPINES -- In a nation where the Hail Mary is heard on public address systems at airports between flight announcements, separation of church and state appears thin.

In a nation where thousands regularly gather for Sunday Masses in shopping centers, the Catholic cultural imprint is without dispute.

This nation is the Philippines, a breathtaking archipelago of some 92 million living on more than 7,000 islands, where Catholic prelates, particularly Catholic bishops, are held in high esteem.

The Philippines is one of only two Asian nations that are predominantly Catholic, the other being East Timor. Catholics represent 80 percent of the population, Protestants another 10 percent, with Muslims, living mostly in the southern Philippines, making up the rest.

Should anyone question the influence of a Catholic prelate here, they need first remember that it was a single call by the late Jaime Sin, then cardinal of Manila, that drew throngs to the streets -- rosaries and portraits of the Virgin Mary in hand -- on Feb. 22, 1986, in support of a military mutiny that precipitated the fall of the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship and led the way to the ascendancy of Corazon ?Cory? Aquino as much-beloved president of the nation.

New national and local elections are set for May 10. The most important is the vote for a new president to replace outgoing president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who has served nine years in office and will be leaving among charges of corruption and abuse of power that have been leveled at the Macapagal-Arroyo government. Sen. Benigno ?Ninoy? Aquino, son of the late former President Aquino, is the front-running candidate and one of the two most likely to become the next Philippine president.

Looking ahead to the elections, the Catholic Bishops? Conference of the Philippines last December issued a paper called ?Catechism on Family and Life for the 2010 Elections,? in which it wrote that ?it would not be morally permissible to vote for candidates who support anti-family policies,? including reproductive health

policies.

?We are going to face serious challenges in the 2010 elections that are not only political but also clearly and profoundly moral. We are a nation that values family and life and yet for years our elected leaders have been attempting to make laws that pose a grave threat to these values. So once again we find the opportune occasion for the church to exercise its teaching authority to guide us in carrying out their political responsibilities in a faithful citizenship,? the guide states.

Abortion is illegal in the Philippines. No candidate supports its legalization. What the bishops had in mind were efforts to pass in the Philippine Congress a bill that has languished in one form or another for a decade. It calls for the creation of a National Policy on Reproductive Health funded by the state that will support comprehensive programs including sex education, family planning supplies and services, and maternal health care assistance.

Sen. Aquino, a member of the Liberal Party, supports the bill, called the ?Reproductive Health and Population and Development Act of 2009,? saying that state-supported sex education is necessary to counter misinformation available on the Internet and other media.

Earlier this month, Aquino, 49, said he supports the plan to have government health centers where the public can avail themselves of contraceptives and that parents should take responsibility for spacing births.

?I believe we have a population problem. I believe I have a responsibility to help so that our children have the opportunity to live better lives,? he said.

He pointed out the population has ?probably doubled? since the 1986 revolution that installed his mother as the first female president of the Philippines.

Aquino supporters say it is courageous on his part to support family planning programs and that he believes that without such programs, the country?s population growth will thwart development efforts.

Aquino?s closest rival in the presidential race, the Nationalist Party?s Manuel Villar, has said the reproductive health bill is a ?divisive matter? and it doesn?t need to be passed into law.

The Philippines? population growth rate, which has been falling since the 1960s, was estimated at 1.957 percent in 2009, according to the CIA World Factbook.

The bishops and other pro-life advocates have said they will not support Aquino for president if he does not withdraw support for the reproductive health bill. For their part, the bishops say they support family planning -- natural family planning -- but oppose government forays into policies that support artificial contraceptives. They equate condoms, the pill and other forms of modern contraception with abortion.

Studies have shown that only a fraction of a percent of the populace practices natural family planning, permitted by official Catholic teachings.

?We are going to organize all our family and life groups that will vote as a bloc for only those candidates who are really pro-family and pro-life,? Fr. Melvin Castro told UCA News last September. The priest, executive secretary of the Episcopal Commission on Family and Life, said the commission will organize their ?voting bloc? with prospective partners among Baptist and Methodist groups it has already contacted.

Still, some Philippine bishops don?t precisely toe the bishops? conference line, especially when it comes to inserting themselves into the election process. Last August, retired Jesuit Bishop Francisco Claver told UCA

News that when churches dictate which candidate to elect, they violate church members? human dignity and freedom of conscience.

Family-planning advocates lament that because of the influence of the Philippine bishops, contraceptives are not available in most government and rural health clinics. The lack of affordable contraceptives, they say, has led to a greater number of abortions, especially among the poor.

Working out of a small office in the alumni center of the University of the Philippines in Manila, Benjamin D. De Leon, president of the Forum for Family Planning and Development, has been a tireless advocate of reproductive health polices in the Philippines for nearly half a century. At age 74, De Leon, a Catholic, is quick to offer population studies taken in the Philippines that he says belie the bishops? ?ideological? fixation on opposing family planning programs.

One study by the World Health Organization found that 36 percent of Filipino women become pregnant before marriage and 45 percent of all pregnancies are either unwanted or ill-timed.

Statistics on abortions are sketchy because most are not reported and hospitals obfuscate records to avoid the law, De Leon said. Meanwhile, he said, estimates put annual abortions at 400,000 to 500,000 and rising. Some studies estimate the figure at nearly 800,000, one of the highest rates in Asia.

Seventy percent of unwanted pregnancies in the Philippines end in abortion, according to Jean-Marc Olivé, the national representative of the World Health Organization. One of four pregnancies in the Philippines ends in abortion, according to Pro-Life Philippines, an antiabortion group. Another study, by the Philippine department of health, found that nearly 100,000 women who have unsafe abortions every year end up in hospitals seeking care.

?Eleven mothers die every day because of pregnancy complication,? said De Leon. ?You can say half of those are due to abortions.? He said passage of the reproductive health bill will lead to a drop in the abortion rate. ?Abortions would drop very, very significantly.? Shaking his head, he added the bishops ?simply don?t believe the bill will lower abortions.?

More organized lay Catholic voices have been emerging. A number of prominent Catholic business leaders and educators created a group connected with the Forum for Family Planning and Development, with the purpose offering a counter voice to the bishops on family planning. Catholics for Reproductive Health Speak Out! describes itself as a group of concerned Catholics ?who believe that reproductive health is a right? and says that ?there is no dissonance with their being Catholic and simultaneously believing in the advocacy and goals of reproductive health and rights.?

In one of their papers, the group finds a link between deep poverty and lack of education and family planning measures. One of their position papers cites a study showing that among the poorest Filipino families, only 10 percent had only one child, while 57 percent had nine or more children. On average, among the poorest 10 percent of women of reproductive age, 44 percent of pregnancies are unwanted.

The official election period opens March 26, with campaigns expected to get increasingly heated.

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Source URL (retrieved on *09/16/2014 - 00:10*): http://ncronline.org/news/global/philippines-divided-over-reproductive-health-policies