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Philippines university's president disowns faculty's support for reproductive health bill

N.J. Viehland | Aug. 22, 2012 NCR Today

QUEZON CITY, Philippines -- The president of Ateneo de Manila University, Jesuit Fr. Jose Ramon Villarin, declared the school's opposition to a bill on responsible parenthood and reproductive health on the school's website [1] Monday, despite support for the bill from almost 200 faculty members.

In his memo to the university community on House Bill 4244 [2], titled "The Responsible Parenthood, Reproductive Health and Population and Development Bill," Villarin said the university does not support the bill in its present form because some provisions threaten constitutional rights and could weaken human and spiritual values. In the memo, he acknowledged the efforts of the faculty members who support the legislation to carefully discern the bill.

He appealed to members of the Ateneo community to study "in-depth" the bill that has divided the community and use the current period of amendment to correct what they judge to be ambiguous or inimical features of the bill.

Congress' Lower House on Aug. 6 voted to end debates on the version of the bill, introduced in March last year despite vigilant lobbies and protests [3] led by bishops and pro-life groups. The vote pushed the lawmaking process to amendment phase before legislators vote on the revised version of the bill, which provides access to and government funding for all forms of contraceptives, including artificial methods not allowed in church teaching.

On Aug. 13, about 160 Ateneo faculty members threw their support behind the campaign to pass the bill using traditional mass media and online platforms, including Twitter [4].

The faculty members issued a statement declaring their belief "that the RH Bill is a vital piece of legislation that needs to be passed urgently."

The bill "upholds the constitutional right of couples to found a family in accordance with their religious convictions; honors our commitments to international covenants and conventions; and promotes the reproductive health and reproductive rights of Filipinos, especially of those who are most marginalized on this issue -- our women, poor families, and young people," read the statement, which professors of Ateneo de Manila University's Loyola Schools and Ateneo Professional Schools signed.

By Sunday, the number of signatories rose to 192. More than a quarter of the signatures come from medical doctors who teach in Ateneo's School of Medicine and Public Health. Others who signed the statement [5] work in the law school, the school of government and the graduate school of business.

It is the third Ateneo faculty statement on the bill since 2008, when 66 members of the university's faculty first released their position paper [6] on the earlier version of the proposed law, tagged RH Bill 5043.

In 2011, more than 200 faculty members from the Ateneo and the state-run University of the Philippines issued Pass the RH Bill Now [7]. Those signatories stressed they signed the statements as individuals. Their recent statement specified they are "in no way speaking for the Ateneo de Manila University, the Society of Jesus, or the rest of their colleagues."

Cristina Montiel of the psychology department told *NCR* the teachers discussed the issues and "decided according to our conscience" to write their 2008 position paper.

Bishops, fellow Ateneans and Catholic groups criticized the teachers. Archbishop Leonardo Medroso of Tagbilaran, a canon lawyer, told Catholic radio Veritas 846's interviewer [8] that the faculty members should be investigated.

"A teacher who defies official Catholic church teaching may not teach in a Catholic institution," Medroso said in Tagalog.

He said it is clear the professors in favor of the bill violate church teaching on the sacredness of life.

Meanwhile, Ateneo graduate and parent Ricardo B. Boncan has initiated a signature campaign that denounces the faculty members' "continued misuse" of the university's name to support "institutionalized contraception," which is "contrary to Catholic teaching," he wrote in a piece [9] on the Philippine Daily Inquirer's website.

Addressing Villarin, Boncan sought an unequivocal statement of the school's stand on artificial contraception and reprimand for faculty members who signed the statement of support for the bill.

Boncan criticized the actions of Villiarin's predecessor, Fr. Bienvenido Nebres, saying his defense of the professors' "academic freedom" emboldened the teachers to use the school's name for their agenda, which is contrary to Church teaching.

"My dear Jesuits, THIS IS NOT FREEDOM, this is ACADEMIC TYRANNY," Boncan wrote.

In his regular column [10] on the Philippine Daily Inquirer, however, Jesuit Fr. Joaquin Bernas stressed that the teaching of the church on artificial contraception, which he adheres to, is not considered infallible doctrine.

In his memo, Villarin expressed appreciation for the faculty members' "social compassion and intellectual efforts" and urged them to continue in "their discernment of the common good."

The Ateneo president also appealed to "all those who are engaged in the Christian formation of our students to ensure that the Catholic position on this matter continues to be taught in our classes, as we have always done."

He said passage of the amended bill should not deter those opposed from bringing their legal questions to court. He called for continued vigilance.

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Links:
[1] http://www.ateneo.edu/index.php?p=120&type=2&sec=29&aid=11138
[2] http://www.congress.gov.ph/download/basic_15/HB04244.pdf
[3] http://ncronline.org/news/global/philippines-reproductive-health-bill-survives-catholic-prayer-power
[4] https://twitter.com/#!/search/%23PassTheRHBill

[5] http://www.interaksyon.com/article/40850/more-ateneo-profs-endorse-rh-bill
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[9] http://opinion.inquirer.net/35094/petition-to-the-ateneo
[10] http://opinion.inquirer.net/34153/rh-bill-dont-burn-the-house-to-roast-a-pig