

Demographics don't spell an end to the culture wars

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 17, 2013 All Things Catholic

To no one's surprise, the Monday release of the Vatican's 2013 statistical yearbook, which surveys the global Catholic population as of 2011, confirmed the shift in Catholicism's center of gravity [away from Europe and North America](#) [1] to the southern hemisphere.

The *Annuario* shows that the global Catholic population, now 1.2 billion, kept pace with overall growth in 2011, but with major regional disparities. Catholicism in Africa increased by 4.3 percent and in Asia by 2 percent, both twice the general rate, but in Europe only 0.3 percent. The trend applies to Christianity generally. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, the demographic heart of the faith is now in Timbuktu, Mali, and by 2100, it will have shifted even further south to Sokoto, Nigeria.

On the lecture circuit, Catholics in North America and Europe curious about how this will play out often ask two very intriguing questions:

- Will the rise of the "global south" mean a shift away from issues that loom large in the West, especially the "culture wars" -- contraception, gay rights, abortion and so on?
- Will it mean a less political church, as Catholicism is increasingly shaped by cultures without the European legacy of church/state entanglement?

The Philippines is one good place to go looking for answers, especially in light of congressional elections this week in which a controversial law requiring the state to distribute contraception played a prominent role. Based on that experience, the most convincing response to both questions is probably "no."

The Philippines is a good Catholic bellwether for four reasons.

First, it's a demographic powerhouse. It's the third-largest Catholic country in the world at 75.3 million believers, projected to rise to 105 million by 2050. Second, Cardinal Luis Antonio "Chito" Tagle of Manila is the most charismatic prelate in Asia, and at just 55, he'll be a force for a long time. Third, the church still has considerable social capital, partly related to its role in the [People Power movement](#) [2] that brought down the regime of Ferdinand Marcos. Fourth, there's a swelling Filipino diaspora, bringing their experiences and outlooks to other Catholic cultures. (One proof of the point: There are an estimated 1.5 million Catholics in Saudi Arabia today, 1.2 million of whom are Filipino guest workers.)

Surveying the situation in the Philippines, it doesn't exactly seem a prescription for a truce in fights over sexual morality or for a less political church.

Among the most contentious issues in Filipino politics of late has been the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act, a long-proposed and much-debated measure finally enacted last year. In a nutshell, it guarantees universal access to contraception and family planning, including government-funded distribution of condoms, intrauterine devices and birth control pills. President Benigno Aquino III signed the measure in December 2012, and the federal Department of Health issued implementing regulations in March.

Critics of the law, mainly faith-based groups, have filed multiple petitions with the Filipino Supreme Court challenging it on three basic grounds: the law undermines constitutional prescriptions describing the family as the fundamental social unit; it fosters abortion, which remains illegal; and it violates religious freedom by using public money to fund procedures many Filipinos oppose on the basis of religious beliefs.

In mid-March, [the Supreme Court granted a temporary restraining order](#) [3] blocking implementation and is set to hear arguments June 18.

Even without the law, the Philippines would not be immune to Western-style cultural conflicts. This week's elections also included a party called Ang Ladlad, created to advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons. Its main candidate was Bemz Benedito, a woman born a man seeking to become the world's first parliamentarian representing an explicitly LGBT party. Her core issue was an antidiscrimination bill crafted by gay rights supporters that's faced strong opposition from the Catholic church.

Early returns suggest the party failed to win enough votes to gain a seat in Congress, but its leaders vowed to keep pressing the fight. Powerful international nongovernmental organizations such as Amnesty International and a variety of pro-choice groups are investing considerable resources in the Philippines, seeing it as a beachhead for changing the climate across the developing world.

The Catholic church is an active player in these battles to an extent that actually can seem jarring by Western standards of church/state separation.

Heading into the recent elections, for instance, a church-sponsored voter education campaign in Cebu, the country's second-largest city, asked Massgoers to sign a pledge to support only candidates who oppose the reproductive health law. The dioceses of Bacolod and Kabankalan distributed sample ballots with pictures of pro-life senatorial contenders, urging Catholics to back them. The Lipa archdiocese also issued a list of favored candidates based on their stands on the reproductive health law, as well as abortion, divorce and the environment.

Most spectacularly, a poster was displayed on the façade of the cathedral in Bacolod with pictures of senatorial candidates who opposed the reproductive health law under the heading of "Team Life" while those who supported the law were labeled "Team Death."

To be fair, Filipino Catholics live in a neighborhood where religious actors are encouraged to play politics. For instance, the Iglesia ni Cristo, the largest indigenous Christian denomination in the country with a following estimated at 27 million, practices what's known as bloc voting, in which all members are expected to vote for candidates endorsed by the church's leadership. Polls suggest somewhere between 70 and 85 percent actually do, making the Iglesia ni Cristo a powerful political force.

Across the developing world, religious groups tend to play a strikingly direct role in politics -- endorsing candidates, taking positions on legislation, even allowing clergy to serve as interim heads of state or on constitutional conventions. In part, that's because in countries that are effectively one-party states or where the political class is perceived as corrupt, churches tend to be the only spheres of life where civil society can find its voice.

Moreover, it's Political Science 101 that social movements tend to be most politically active when they think they have a shot at winning.

That rule of thumb, for instance, helps explain why U.S. bishops tend to be more aggressive about the culture wars than their European counterparts: Issues like abortion and gay rights are settled to a greater extent in Europe. During the fall's synod in Rome, Bishop Kieran Conry of Arundel and Brighton captured the point in explaining why his diocese didn't contest the 2006 "Equality Law" in the U.K., which made it illegal for adoption agencies to refuse to serve same-sex couples: "We try not to fight battles we're likely to lose."

In most of the developing world, the situation is different. Religious groups command respect, and the social climate is receptive to traditional morality, making church leaders more inclined to believe they have a winning hand. In the case of the Philippines, opposition to the reproductive health law even includes celebrities such as boxing icon Manny Pacquiao, despite the fact that Pacquiao, like so many erstwhile Catholics in the "global south," has reportedly joined an evangelical church.

Three caveats are in order.

First, traditional sexual morality is only part of the picture vis-à-vis faith and politics in the developing world. Catholics in regions such as Africa, Asia and Latin America also tend to have what most Westerners would perceive as progressive views on many other issues, such as the economy, the environment, international relations, war and peace, and so on.

Second, contraception and gay rights are rarely the first things most Catholics in the developing world mention when asked about their priorities. Generally, they point instead to poverty and violence. (On Thursday, Archbishop Gabriel Mbilingi of Lubango, Angola, wrote to a European Union tax summit to plead for more effective measures to combat tax avoidance by multinational corporations, estimated to cost poor nations \$725 billion to \$810 billion per year. He was joined by Bishop Ludwig Schwarz of Linz, Austria. That's the sort of thing prelates and activists in the developing world tend to get out of bed thinking about.)

Third, opposing the reproductive health law was not the only way the Filipino church engaged this week's elections. Catholics were also involved in trying to promote a free and fair ballot, including an initiative in the Pasig diocese that brought Muslims, Catholics and other Christians together to form watchdog teams at polling places. In general, religious activists in the "global south" tend to be on the front lines of pro-democracy efforts.

All that said, here's the bottom line: Anyone thinking (or, perhaps, hoping) that the rise of a world church means the end of the culture wars or of a robust role for Catholicism in those conflicts is likely destined for disappointment.

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