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Cardinal Tagle, church leaders, Filipinos challenge officials over 'pork' scam

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Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle and other church leaders joined thousands of Filipinos to protest lawmakers' and government officials' misuse of public funds and to call for the abolition of discretionary funds Monday.

Tagle, priests, nuns and other religious joined protesters at the Million People March in Luneta Park in Manila on National Heroes' Day to express in a creative way the Filipinos' collective anger over what has become known as the "pork barrel scam."

Scores of lawmakers are accused of redirecting government development funds for personal benefit. The National Bureau of Investigation is probing allegations that between 2007 and 2009, lawmakers misused more than 10 billion pesos ($230 million) in Priority Development Assistance Funds and gas funds meant to aid rebuilding projects in places ravaged by typhoons in 2009. Thirty-five lawmakers, including three senators, are accused of being involved in the scheme, according to the Commission on Audit [1].

Philippines President Benigno Aquino III ran for president on an anti-corruption platform with the slogan, "The straight path." But protesters say they do not trust Aquino's and lawmakers' discretion over large funds. The money should instead be included in budgets of departments responsible for social development concerns, such as housing, health and education, they say.

On Monday, protesters, mostly dressed in white, chanted, "Oink, oink," sang, played music and listened to speeches. They arrived in pig hats, carrying streamers and pig-shaped bread, and shared spaghetti and other packed food. Other dioceses around the country held simultaneous protests.

The crowd cheered as Tagle marched on the muddy grass in his white vestments to speak to the protesters. He greeted the crowd in Filipino, wishing them a blessed National Heroes' Day, held Aug. 26 each year to honor and remember the country's heroes, and urging them to help one another and cooperate.

The cardinal invited people to love the poor and those who are suffering.

"Whatever part of the world, let us prove that the Filipino is honorable," he said. "We are honorable because we fear God, respect life, value [people], persevere for our country and care for nature."

Tagle said systems and laws should lead to heroism. At the end of his message, he led protesters in singing a liturgical song about Christian responsibility.

Tagle then issued a prayer in Filipino, read by Msgr. Clemente Ignacio, to open a forum on the scam at Manila Hotel just beside the park.

The prayer thanked God for his goodness and for Filipino heroes. After seeking forgiveness for "sins, abuses

and failures," Tagle prayed for the "softening of hardened hearts, opening of blinded eyes, and enabling twisted tongues to utter the truth."

Manila protesters told *NCR* they came to the park to show force and to let legislators know they are angry with misuse of their hard-earned money.

"Even if we are not 1 million people, I think the number and atmosphere here makes it clear to the government we are not happy with their performance," Rosa Munoz of Marikina told *NCR*. She said she expects the issue will drag on and may need follow-up action.

Benedictine Sr. Mary John Mananzan told the Manila Hotel forum that the millions of pesos given to each senator and member of Congress and the money given to local officials for governance at their discretion put "too much power in the hands of one person."

"When people's taxes just go in pockets of [the] already rich, that is in religious language [a] sin crying to heaven for vengeance," Mananzan said.

She said she hoped Monday's rally would pave the way for government leaders to work on fundamental budgetary reform to ensure people get the money they need in form of government services.

She also said she hopes the government will work for accountability.

"Who has been punished? The whistle-blower is the one being punished," Mananzan said.

Franciscan Fr. Robert Reyes, known as "the running priest" because he ran around cities and across islands to promote awareness for various causes, was also asked to address the forum. He said he has also lost hope in government's ability to probe and resolve the problem of corruption.

He talked about an effort in Congress to create a committee to investigate itself [2].

"How can you investigate yourselves?" Reyes asked the forum. "Can you tell the truth? People are very cynical of all of you. We feel that it's as if you are no longer up to task.

"If you can no longer do the job, follow the example of Pope Benedict. Resign. If you can, play ball and take the challenge," Reyes said.

[N.J. Viehland writes for *NCR* from Manila.]

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