

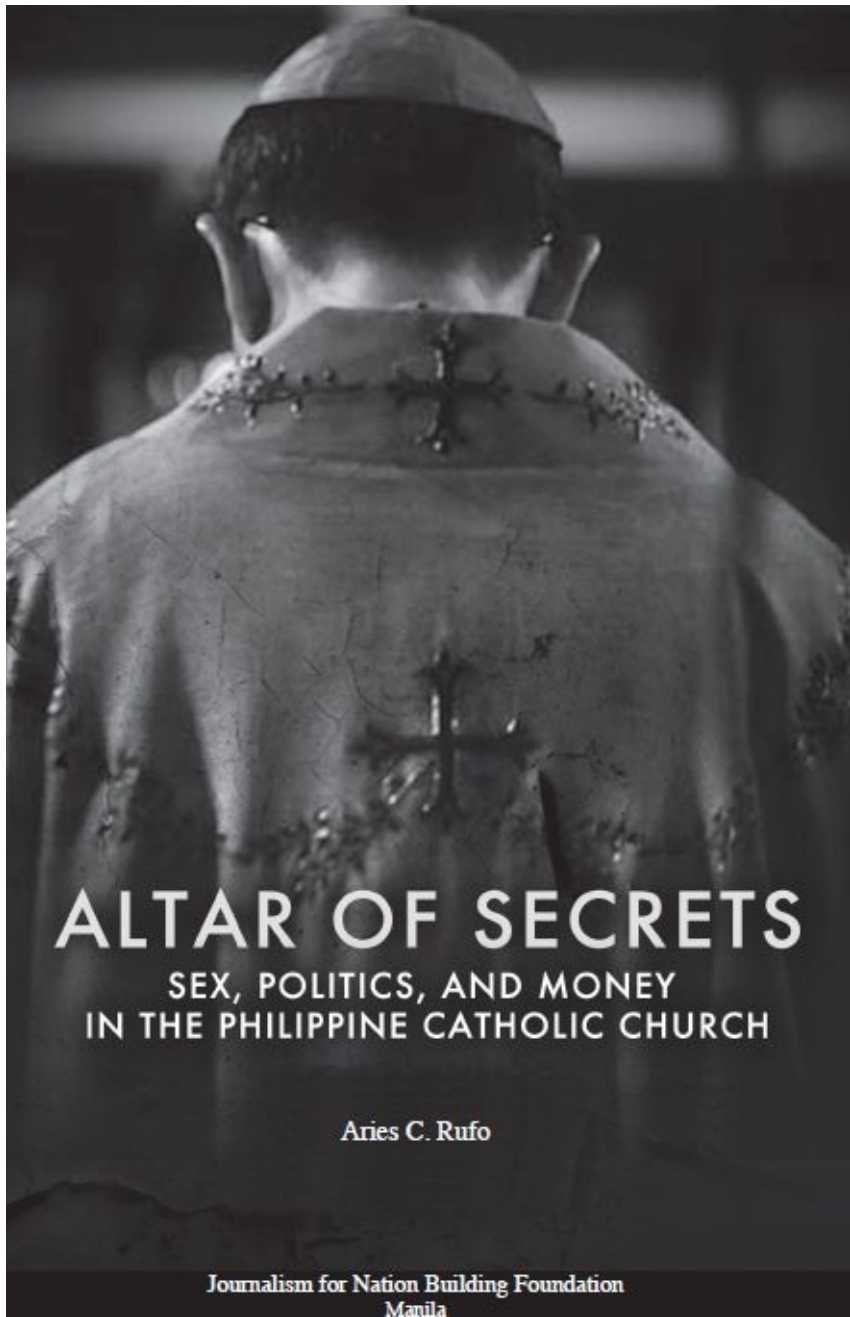
ALTAR OF SECRETS Sex, Politics, and Money in the Philippine Catholic Church

# ALTAR OF SECRETS

SEX, POLITICS, AND MONEY  
IN THE PHILIPPINE CATHOLIC CHURCH

ARIES C. RUFO

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
MARITES DAÑGUILAN VITUG



# ALTAR OF SECRETS

SEX, POLITICS, AND MONEY  
IN THE PHILIPPINE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Aries C. Rufo

Journalism for Nation Building Foundation  
Manila

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*For those who remain steadfast in their faith  
yet ache for reforms within the Holy Mother Church*

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## ACRONYMS

AMRSP	<i>Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines</i>
BBC	<i>Basic Christian communities</i>
BBT	<i>Basal Body Temperature Method</i>
BEC	<i>Basic Ecclesial Community</i>
BOM	<i>Billings Ovulation Method</i>
CBCP	<i>Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines</i>
CJLI	<i>Child Justice League Inc.</i>
FABC	<i>Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference</i>
Likhaan	<i>Linangan ng Kababaihan Inc.</i>
NFP	<i>Natural Family Planning Method</i>
PCP	<i>I First Plenary Council of the Philippines</i>
PCP	<i>II Second Plenary Council of the Philippines</i>
PPCRV	<i>Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting</i>
PRC	<i>Philippine Realty Corp. (realty arm of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Manila)</i>
PREIC	<i>Philippine Radio Educational and Information Center</i>
PTC	<i>Philippine Trust Company</i>
RCAM	<i>Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Manila</i>
RH	<i>Reproductive Health; also refers to the bill</i>
RVA	<i>Radio Veritas-Asia</i>
RVP	<i>Radio Veritas-Philippines</i>
SDM	<i>Standard Days Method</i>
SLI	<i>Strategic Lending Inc.</i>
STM	<i>Sympto-thermal Method</i>
UBAS	<i>Ugnayan ng Barangay at Simbahan</i>

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Apostolic administrator	<i>one who administers a diocese on behalf of the Pope</i>
Apostolic Nunciature	<i>the diplomatic mission of the Holy See to a country, equivalent to an embassy</i>
Apostolic Vicariate	<i>a territorial jurisdiction where a diocese has not yet been established</i>
Apostolic visitor	<i>a papal representative tasked to look into a special circumstance in a diocese and submit a report to the Holy See</i>
Archbishop	<i>head of an archdiocese; a bishop of a major metropolitan diocese</i>
Archdiocese	<i>an ecclesiastical district made up of several dioceses</i>
Auxiliary Bishop	<i>an additional bishop to a diocese</i>
Axis of evil	<i>phrase used by Archbishop Oscar Cruz to refer to three legislative measures—reproductive health, same-sex marriage, and divorce</i>
Binated mass	<i>a second mass performed by a priest for the day</i>
Bishop	<i>chief priest, or head of a diocese</i>
Canon Law	<i>a body of laws that govern the ecclesiastical authority of the Church</i>
Cardinal	<i>a bishop who is a member of the College of Cardinals that acts as adviser to the Pope and elects his successor; a title bestowed by papal appointment</i>
Church of the Poor	<i>a mission and vision adopted by the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines to serve the poor and empower them to achieve social justice</i>
Clericalism	<i>a policy of maintaining or increasing the power of a religious hierarchy</i>
Congregation for the	<i>the oldest of the nine congregations in the Roman Curia whose main</i>
Doctrine of the Faith	<i>task is to promote and safeguard the doctrine on faith and morals in the Catholic world</i>
Diocese	<i>an ecclesiastical district supervised by a bishop</i>
Dispensation	<i>a process where a priest is released from the duties and responsibilities connected to his clerical state, like saying Mass or conferring sacraments</i>
Finance Council	<i>a committee headed by a bishop or a parish priest with lay people as members. Whose task is to manage the properties and finances of the diocese or parish</i>
Floating status	<i>off-detailed; also, no official assignment or position</i>
Incardination	<i>the official acceptance of a clergyman into a diocese or acceptance of a priest from one diocese to another</i>



Kairos	<i>Greek word, meaning right or opportune time</i>
Liberation theology	<i>a school of thought combining political philosophy and theology of salvation as liberation from injustice and poverty</i>
Moderator curiae	<i>one who oversees administrative duties in a diocesan office</i>
Monsignor	<i>an honorific title of a member of the clergy</i>
Oeconomus	<i>the diocesan finance administrator</i>
Parochial Vicar	<i>a priest assigned to a parish, basically an assistant to the parish priest</i>
Pastoral plan	<i>a set of concerns, strategies in a diocese to achieve a common goal</i>
Pastoral statement	<i>a statement collectively issued by a collegial body of bishops on pressing issues</i>
Prelature	<i>a jurisdictional structure in the Church comprised of a prelate (bishop) clergy and the laity tasked with specific pastoral activities</i>
Presbyterium	<i>collegial body of priests in a diocese</i>
Quaternate	<i>fourth mass performed by a priest for the day</i>
‘Quota system’	<i>a provision that allows a priest to remain in the ministry if he has sired only one child and dismissal if two or more children</i>
Trinated mass	<i>third mass performed by a priest for the day</i>
Vatican II	<i>the assembly of all bishops of the Roman Catholic Church held from 1962–1965</i>
Vicar-general	<i>assistant to the bishop</i>
Vicar	<i>an administrative deputy, especially in a diocese</i>

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**T**HIS BOOK IS NOT DIVINELY INSPIRED. It draws inspiration and strength from the people who believed in the project, who believed it was time to focus a different lens on the Philippine Catholic Church. These include Church people themselves who are aching for reforms within the institution.

The idea for the book first came up after *Newsbreak* published the stories of Bishop Crisostomo Yalung and Bishop Teodoro Bacani in 2003, which I wrote. It was one of the best and the worst of times for the magazine. We broke the long silence on the misdemeanors of holy men. But this caused trouble in our two-year-old magazine. One of the members of our board of advisers was pressured by Jaime Cardinal Sin to resign, saying in a letter that he should not stay a minute longer with an “evil magazine.”

The project stayed on the back burner for years. I did not have the confidence to tackle a mammoth subject like the Church that is averse to transparency. But I believe there is a time for everything.

Marites Dañguilan Vitug, author of the bestselling book *Shadow of Doubt*, gave me the spine to pursue this book. Without her unfailing support, contagious confidence, and firm belief that it can be done, this book would not have materialized. She is the real Force behind all this.

Special mention goes to my *Newsbreak* family, especially Miriam Grace Go and Glenda Gloria, who shared their insights on how to present the book. They also propped me up when self-doubt crept in. Carmela Fonbuena was always supportive. Cecille Santos and Arnold Gueco provided logistical support. Kristine Servando did the copy editing and Rey Santos worked on the bibliography.

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

AS A CHILD, I WAS INTRODUCED TO THE CATHOLIC CHURCH by my late grandmother. Like any devout Ilocana Catholic, every Sunday, she'd wear a dark blue dress for church which I would later learn was the uniform of the Catholic Women's League. They were a bunch of old women assisting the parish priest during Sunday mass. During the offertory, they would go around carrying baskets where people would drop their coins or bills. I loved hearing the clanking of the coins as the basket was passed around. At the time, I had no idea what it was for, just wondering how many candies one could buy from all the money in those baskets.

When I reached third grade, my grandmother's cousin, also an Ilocana, visited our place in Urbiztondo, Pangasinan. We were eight in the family (obviously, my parents did not practice family planning) and this *lola* from my grandmother's side suggested that someone should enter the seminary and serve God. She thought I was a perfect candidate, and strangely enough, I shared her view. I thought it would be great to be a priest, to be known by everyone in town.

In sixth grade, I found myself frequenting the church almost every day, dropping by before and after classes, praying before the images of saints and the Virgin Mary. The only prayer I knew then was The Lord's Prayer. I loved staying inside the church for it offered refuge from the punishing heat outside. The airy atmosphere and the deafening silence were pure ecstasy.

At the parochial high school, I learned more about the Catholic Church from our religion class. I learned how to say the rosary and memorized the different mysteries and Apostle's Creed. We studied the lives of the apostles, and learned about papal infallibility, chastity, celibacy, and the evils of sex. I joined the choir group so I could sit close to the altar.

For some reason, the yearning to become a priest waned and I found myself attracted to journalism. So I took up journalism in college—the allure of a byline more attractive than the prospect of delivering a homily to a captive crowd.

When I became a reporter for the *Manila Times* in 1992, one of the first assignments was the religion beat. I remember being told by my editor, Lizzie Lazo, to write a special report on the recently concluded Second Plenary Council of the Philippines. A newbie then, I never really understood why it was such an important event for the Church and the special report never got off the ground.

But covering the press conferences of the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of the Philippines (CBCP), meeting the bishops, and writing about their pastoral statements reignited my fascination with the Church. I was also covering the health beat then, and I saw up close how Health Secretary Juan Flavio Velasco engaged the Holy Mother Church in a word war on condoms and contraceptives. Whatever Flavio said, and whatever the Church countered, made it to page one. I was ambivalent: my sympathies were with Flavio's cause but my loyalty was with the Church.

The defining moment of my love affair with the Church beat began when the Monte de Piedad, which was previously owned by the Church, declared a bank holiday following a rush of withdrawals. By a stroke of luck, I was able to find a source who was a gold mine of stories. For more than a month in 1996, the Monte de Piedad saga was splashed on the front pages of the *Manila Times* which detailed all the dirty secrets behind the troubled bank.

Some Church people, despite knowing my background, suspected I was on the take, a paid hack by someone out to destroy the Church. One time, while at the CBCP office, from out of the blue, a monsignor commented on my “nice” polo shirt, asking if I had just bought it. It was not new at all, just newly-pressed and I was sure the monsignor, who did not have any fashion taste, had seen it many times before.

Some bishops and Church sources never forgave me for exposing the skeletons of Monte de Piedad. Up to now, a former aide of the late Jaime Cardinal Sin, who still works at the Archdiocese of Manila, has been blocking all my requests for an interview with the current Prince of the Church, Manila Archbishop Jose Antonio Cardinal Tagle, for this book. (The spokesman for the Iglesia ni Cristo is no different. He ignored my requests for an interview for a story I wrote back when I was still a newspaper reporter in 1998.)

In 2003, my relationship with some Church people got even worse after *Newsbreak* magazine exposed Bishop Crisostomo Yalung’s affair with a confessant. It did not help that a few months later, I wrote about the sexual harassment complaint against Bishop Teodoro Bacani, which led to his early retirement from the Church.

A monsignor, on the suggestion of a Radio Veritas reporter, sought to ban me from the CBCP premises and from using its facilities. I was summoned by the monsignor’s secretary who relayed the decision. I was told I was not a legitimate reporter and had no business staying at the CBCP compound. I ignored the ban but confronted the Radio Veritas reporter and the monsignor through text about the veracity of the secretary’s claim. I never got a reply.

But not all Church leaders are narrow-minded. My notoriety was both a curse and a blessing. Some bishops knew that I was only after the story, that I had nothing personal against them. I was just doing my duty as a journalist. They would give words of encouragement, believing that reporting on the failings and frailties of some of their brethren would only strengthen the Church. They reaffirmed my faith in the Holy Mother Church.

\* \* \*

Why a book on the Catholic Church? Dozens of books have been written on the Philippine Church enough to fill an entire section of a library. But most of these books were written by Church leaders themselves, or Church people and insiders, targeting a specialized audience. Retired Archbishop Oscar Cruz, who has written a number of books on the Church, jokingly said he could count with his fingers those who have read his books.

A number of books on the Philippine Catholic Church have been written using the lens of a journalist. Some were compilations of stories previously published, tackling specific subjects. *People, Priests and Pedophiles* by Earl Wilkinson and *Reverend Governor* by Bong Lacson are among the few.

This book attempts to make an honest portrayal of the men in white vestments. It seeks to demystify the people perched on a moral high ground and aims to show that they are as human as we are—vulnerable to

mistakes, faults and wrongdoing, and susceptible to temptation. They may be divinely inspired, but they could not deny their humanity and all their weaknesses. We think they have superhuman powers, but they too have feet of clay.

As the religion of choice and circumstance of majority of Filipinos, it is a given fact that the Catholic Church plays a major role in the Filipino family, society, and the national psyche. It is a constant fixture in one's lives—from womb to tomb, despite the passage of the reproductive health law.

While the Church dips its fingers into every aspect of Filipino life, it has resisted outside attempts to poke into its internal affairs. Like a cloistered monastery, it has kept from the public the scandals and irregularities of its members within its sacrosanct walls. Those who do otherwise are considered enemies of the Church. Thus, some of the sources in this book preferred to talk anonymously, or gave context and background without attribution.

This is the double standard of the Church. It demands responsibility from the faithful and accountability from government. Yet it shirks from the same standards when self-assessment requires it.

From the collapse of Monte de Piedad in the mid-'90s to sexual indiscretions and financial mismanagement today, the Church has observed the Code of Omerta, a sense of brotherhood that demands that dark secrets be kept in order to preserve honor and bring no shame. Its deafening silence on its erring members is a stark contrast to the Church's thunderous preaching on morality and politics.

The book focuses on the Catholic Church diocesan hierarchy and purposely does not dwell on members of religious congregations. A short comparison: the congregation (which is open to women) takes a vow of poverty, chastity, obedience with a defined spirituality and charism based on the vision of its founder. The diocesan hierarchy however, does not take the same vows as the religious (poverty for one), serves in a parish, and administers the sacraments and is under the control and supervision of a bishop.

To be sure, the winds of change have started to blow toward the direction of the local Church, but change does not happen overnight.

## INTRODUCTION

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPENETRABLE and least scrutinized institutions in the Philippines. We put our boundless trust in the holy men who lead the Church. We repose our steely faith in God, in our bishops and priests, they who say mass, baptize us, marry us, give us communion, listen to our confessions, and bless us. We regard them with awe. They are God's men on earth.

Our past shaped us to be this way. We grew up in towns where at the center stood the imposing Catholic Church, side by side with the school run by priests and nuns. Life seemed to revolve around these enduring institutions. Education and religion fused; going to school seamlessly blended with attending mass, evening novenas, and joining the Sodality of Our Lady and Columbus Squires.

Then, in those placid times, it was not our place to question the order of things. We learned catechism, prayed our rosaries, and looked up to the men in cassocks. Why, they could do no wrong. God and truth were on their side. They were special, a notch above us, ordinary humans.

But the times, they have changed. Critical thinking has shaken dogma. With the modern world has come hard-earned wisdom, built from years of experience and learning.

Like us, the Church lived through turbulent times in the '70s and early '80s—martial law, detention of opposition leaders and activists, torture and disappearances, a communist insurgency, and the assassination of Benigno Aquino Jr. Some bishops and priests embraced liberation theology and led grassroots communities in their struggle for social justice; thus began the phenomenon of the BCC or basic Christian communities. The Church did not only tend to spiritual needs, it looked after the welfare of the poor and marginalized. We saw our priests up close, no longer detached in their pulpits and confession boxes.

Then, in 1986, the Church played a crucial role in ousting the authoritarian ruler, Ferdinand Marcos, and restoring democracy in the country. Its help was called again in 2001 to depose President Joseph Estrada in the midst of his impeachment trial where he was accused of corruption and betraying public trust. Twice, the Church was victorious.

Elsewhere in the world, democracy movements marched and kicked out dictators. The clamor for openness reverberated, not only in government but in other institutions, including the Church. Civil society blossomed. Soon after, transparency and accountability became bywords in many parts of the globe. The "Arab Spring" is the latest manifestation of this global surge.

Technology has hastened all this. With 24/7 news, the Internet, and mobile phones, information has become accessible. We are no longer isolated islands; we have now become connected to the world. Distances have shrunk. Immediately, we know what is happening in Europe, US, and Australia and certain

events there affect and influence us.

I mention Europe, Australia, and the US because, in these parts, the Catholic Church has attempted to be transparent. It has responded to complaints on sexual abuse by its priests, disclosed these to the public, sanctioned erring clergymen, and adopted zero-tolerance policies. In the US, questions on Church finances and how these have been managed have been raised and probed.

These cannot yet be said for the Philippines.

IN THIS BOOK, *Altar of Secrets: Sex, Politics, and Money in the Philippine Catholic Church*, Aries Rufo shows a Church that is cloaked in secrecy. It keeps the wrongdoing of its bishops and priests—in sexual misconduct and financial mismanagement—within its confines and lets them get away, unpunished. They're sent to other assignments overseas or are simply asked to retire or resign.

Part One illustrates this through cases involving bishops ([Chapters 2 and 3](#)) and priests ([Chapter 4](#)). [Chapter 1](#) gives us the big picture, showing the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines struggling in dealing with these sins of its men. They have set guidelines but these fall short of cleansing the Church and achieving justice for the victims.

In Part Two, we learn about how the bishops and priests handle finances, mainly donations from the flock, and, in the process, we get to understand the structure of the hierarchical Church. A bishop is like a king and the diocese is his kingdom. A finance council, which is supposed to serve as check and balance, hasn't worked because bishops, for the most part, don't run democracies. Many dioceses are holdouts of the feudal ages.

Accountability is not a strong suit of the Church, as [Chapters 6, 7, and 8](#) dramatically show: men of the cloth who mismanaged a bank, siphoned money from Church coffers, and were opaque—and continue to be—about how funds were spent. Yet, bishops demand accountability and transparency from public officials. After all, they are not beyond double standard and hypocrisy.

Reforms, however, are taking place and these are highly dependent on the leaders, the bishops who try to change mindsets and systems. The diocese of Novaliches is one example, as [Chapter 9](#) narrates.

The Church in politics is the theme of Part Three. Relationships of Church leaders and presidents count for much in a personalistic society like ours, as [Chapter 10](#) shows. This was most visible during the term of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo when she showered her bishop-friends with largesse. Known as the “Malacañang Diocese,” these bishops, in turn, supported her despite the corruption scandals that hounded her regime.

Nowhere among Catholic countries in the world is the Church deeply involved in the shaping of policy than in the Philippines. It is anachronistic that the Church plays such a dominant role in a secular society where we supposedly draw a line between Church and State. [Chapter 11](#) takes us into the Church-State dynamics of the reproductive health law, which the Church actively campaigned against, flagrantly intruding on State affairs.

[Chapter 12](#) lays out a path forward for Church and State, where both can work together, minus the acrimony, for good government. A few dioceses have linked up with the interior and local government department to take part in a barangay-level program that would ensure delivery of basic services and full

disclosure of budgets and expenses.

In Part Four ([Chapter 13](#)), we see a Church that is slow in reforming itself despite calls for renewal by the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines. For sure, pockets of change have taken place but these have yet to be the norm.

In one area, that of gender relations, the Catholic Church is still steeped in a macho culture ([Chapter 14](#)). Women are inferior to men, as illustrated in the case of a bishop who degraded a nun so badly that she left the convent. In an institution where power resides in men, the masculine mindset is rarely challenged.

*ALTAR OF SECRETS* is the first of its kind in the country. This is a journalist's attempt to bring some air and light into a musty place, where there's so little circulation and transparency. As Anne Lamott wrote in her book, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, "Light reveals us to ourselves." And, if I may add, to others.

The author, Aries Rufo, has covered the Catholic Church extensively. For almost 20 years, he followed the comings and goings of bishops, their big plenaries and pastoral declarations, as well as their mishaps. He has broken new ground in reporting on this pillar that has an outsize influence on our country.

In raising these issues about the Church, we want to encourage an open discussion that, hopefully, will lead to a more discerning public. We want to cajole: Do take away those blinders, be vigilant. Engage the Church, ask tough questions. Demand accountability, push for transparency.

After all, the Church, like 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.

As Lamott beautifully wrote, "When nothing new can get in, that's death. When oxygen can't find a way in, you die."

Marites Dañguilan Vitug

*President*

Journalism for Nation Building Foundation



P a r t O n e

C H A P T E R 1

CLOSET  
FATHERS

TUCKED SOMEWHERE IN METRO MANILA WAS A GATED orphanage run by nuns. Lush trees and greenery covered the sprawling area, providing a fresh respite from the urban jungle just outside its premises. At the time of my visit in August 2012, a few workers were repairing some of the structures and buildings, while volunteer staff did the laundry and the cooking.

But this is no ordinary orphanage. It was (or still might be) home to some of the children fathered by Catholic priests. The sister in charge confirmed that they had housed children whose fathers were priests. “We accept the children regardless of who their fathers are,” the sister said. But she clarified, “We have no children sired by priests right now.”

She spoke these words normally, as if answering an ordinary question. After all, an orphanage is an orphanage, a refuge of infants and children seen as a burden or shame by their fathers and/or mothers.

Inside the orphanage, the nun led us to a newly constructed one-storey building that served as the nursery for newborns. They also had a nursery school. She said it was by the grace of God that they were able to take care of the children before they were sent to their foster parents.

Pressed to confirm reports that the orphanage served as a halfway house for women impregnated by priests, the soft-spoken nun said it was not the issue. “The issue is to give these children a decent future.”

Priests fathering children, violating their vow of continence and celibacy, is a phenomenon that seems to have lost its shock value. Sure, some people are still scandalized, but even Church higher-ups have accepted this as a matter of course. In fact, the Archdiocese of Manila has an allocation for financial support to children fathered by members of the clergy.

In some areas, like in Pampanga, people have such a forgiving attitude that they have been willing to gloss over the extra-curricular activities of their parish priests. Priests are still human, some argue, and they are not immune from the frailties of man.

In Marbel diocese, which covers the provinces of South Cotabato, Sarangani, General Santos City, and some parts of Sultan Kudarat, a journalist says he knows of at least 15 priests who have sired children. “Some of them are still active in the ministry. In one case, I even served as [a] bridge between the priest and the woman. I know [this] because they are my personal friends. Sometimes, we go to girlie joints for ‘pastoral visits.’”<sup>1</sup> In one instance, after a priest died, two women showed up to claim the body.



*Priests during a plenary assembly*

A few of these closet fathers had voluntarily left the priesthood and gotten married. Some became politicians.

Priests are under the administrative control and jurisdiction of the diocese where they are assigned or incardinated. (Incardination means a clergy is placed under the jurisdiction of a bishop or an ecclesiastical superior.) As an autonomous body, distinct and separate from other dioceses (but still in union with the Universal Church), sanctions and penalties against priests violating their vow of celibacy largely depend on the bishops.<sup>2</sup>

There are 86 archdioceses, dioceses, and vicariates in the country, each represented by an archbishop or a bishop.<sup>3</sup> A few are strict, like former Archbishop Oscar Cruz, who during his term in Pampanga defrocked a number of priests who were having affairs—but some are forgiving and benevolent, like Cruz’s successor, Archbishop Paciano Aniceto.

To a large extent, the Church has also shoved under the rug the growing number of sexual-misconduct cases, misdeeds and abuses committed by priests. In a stroke of luck, if one may call it that, the Philippine Church has been spared the sexual abuse crisis that has rocked the Roman Catholic Church elsewhere in the world.

In some cases, sexual-abuse cases by priests are kept from the public eye; the cases that get reported in the media soon die down, with Church officials clamping down on information, silencing Church officials who are privy to the case. Other priests would refuse to discuss any details.

This code of omerta that pervades a macho Church has spawned a “culture of silence and denial,” as Cruz describes it, where “the Church appears to be accepting with nonchalance cases of exposed aberrant clerical sexual escapades.”<sup>4</sup>

This Church culture came about as Church leaders “became accustomed to many and extensive sexual transgressions of clerics that they already look at such clerical indiscretions as a matter of course.” Secondly, Church officials have done nothing to impose corrective if not punitive actions on the errant priests, perpetuating the culture of silence and denial even more.

“We confess that grave sexual misconduct by clerics and religious

[orders] in the Philippines have rocked the bark of Peter.”

In 2002, the winds of change worldwide finally swept the local Catholic Church, when they issued the landmark message “Hope in the Midst of Crisis,” in which the bishops expressed “great sorrow and shame” and apologized for the sexual misconduct of its own members.<sup>5</sup> The bishops’ move came a year after Pope John Paul II issued an apology for the injustices, including sexual abuses, committed by Roman Catholic priests in the Pacific nations.<sup>6</sup>

In their message, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) said: “We confess that grave sexual misconduct by clerics and religious [orders] in the Philippines have rocked the bark of Peter... . We your pastors humbly ask for forgiveness for the grave sins committed by some leaders against members of the flock.” The bishops, however, tempered their apology by reminding the faithful that “the great majority of the clergy are faithful to their priestly and religious commitments ...”

The bishops also announced that they were in the process of drafting a protocol that sought to address various forms of sexual misconduct and abuse. The protocol, the CBCP said, was expected to “provide steps for profound renewal.”

The effect was immediate. The cleansing within the Church occurred, but not from the bottom as many had expected, but from the top.

What the bishops did not anticipate was that only a few months after they issued their apology, a brethren bishop, Crisostomo Yalung, would be forced to resign for fathering a child with a married woman. And a few months later, Bishop Teodoro Bacani followed in Yalung’s footsteps, after he was accused of sexual harassment by his secretary.

Monsignor Pedro Quitarino, media director of the CBCP, said Vatican action on Bacani’s case was swift “since it came right after the Yalung scandal.” Still, Rome’s decisions on the two resigned bishops were not the same. Yalung was sent to exile in the United States, where he now works as a counselor, while Bacani was stripped of his diocese.

The succeeding [chapters \(Two and Three\)](#) will highlight cases of sexual misconduct by ranking Church officials—Yalung and Bishop Cirilo Almario. Chapter Four focuses on the diocese of Pampanga where an unusually high number of priests carry on affairs. In all these, the Church has not publicly admitted wrongdoing by its members.

## PASTORAL GUIDELINE

On September 1, 2003, the CBCP issued the “Pastoral Guideline on Sexual Abuses and Misconduct by the Clergy,” listing the protocol that bishops should follow and observe in dealing with errant priests.<sup>7</sup>

It covered violations of continence and abstinence, child abuse, sexual misconduct (either heterosexual or homosexual), and cases of “priest-fathers.” The landmark document, however, was wanting.

As early as 1999, or four years before the protocol was adopted, Cruz presented a “submission”—a set of guidelines—for consideration by the CBCP plenary on how to handle sexually misbehaving priests. Cruz observed that “there was big silence and marked quiet” when he spoke before the assembly.<sup>8</sup> “There could be several reasons for this, One, the membership was simply engrossed in their respective priorities and agendas. Two, the paper proved irrelevant or immaterial to their own local, individual, pastoral and administrative concerns. And three, the submission actually touched on delicate and critical issue that was both precarious and difficult to address.”

Cruz believed it was the third reason that explained the “rather strange and distinct hush that pervaded the conference hall precisely because the ‘Submission’ touched on an ecclesial problem then sadly obtaining in the Church in the Philippines.”

What was in the “submission” that the bishops would rather ignore or simply let pass? Cruz proposed that priests who had sired a child should automatically be removed—not just suspended—from the priesthood. Cruz argued that a priest who has fathered a child has lost his clerical state by violating the continence and celibacy required of priests.

Second, as a parent, the priest-father is now duty bound to fulfill his parental obligation to the child or the children. By remaining as priests but ignoring their parental obligation, the priest-fathers lose the moral authority to preach about family life “when they themselves are alien to the families they authored; when they themselves do not parent their own children; [and thus] have no right to teach about fidelity to human and moral commitment when they themselves grossly violate their own priestly commitment.”<sup>9</sup>

Cruz also argued for the children of priest-fathers who may suffer “from subtle if not marked psychical disorientation and emotional insecurity caused by their blurred identity, plus the doubtful living and questionable doings of their biological fathers further adding to the usually cruel jokes and painful remarks they get from their peers.” These children “could rightfully feel deprived and even victimized, ultimately growing into angry and resentful individuals with antagonistic posture and hateful disposition toward others.”<sup>10</sup>

Further, allowing priest-fathers to continue with their vocation is unfair to members of the Church who are faithful to their priestly commitment, Cruz continued. This sends a confused and wrong signal to seminarians. It also affects the credibility of the Church with the laity—with the Church strict and demanding about the moral life of the people, yet allowing priests who fail the moral standards to remain with the Church.

Based on the feedback he received, bishops, as well as their respective priests, found Cruz’s position on errant priests “too canonical, rather unrealistic, simply unbearable and the like.” Bishops and priests

questioned his position as lacking in charity, understanding and forgiveness “mandated by the Gospel in dealing with sinners, clerics included.”<sup>11</sup>

Others posed an outrageous argument saying that separating priest-fathers from the priesthood would further worsen the shortage of priests. Some even argued that since priests are considered the alter ego of Christ, why impose an unreasonably strict and severe punishment? Still, some also argued that separating priest-fathers from the ministry would deprive them precisely of the income to support their children.

## QUOTA SYSTEM

It took four more years before the CBCP finally sat down to come up with a guideline on clerical sexual misconduct. This underwent several changes. In 2002, a head committee tasked to prepare the first draft presented it to the plenary. A second draft was made, incorporating the suggestions by the bishops. The third draft included proposals from the clergy. In July 2003, a fourth draft was submitted to the plenary. Then on September 1, 2003, the CBCP permanent council approved the protocol.

One contentious issue that Cruz strongly opposed was the “quota system,” which allowed a priest to remain in the ministry if he fathered only one child. It is only when he begets a second child that he will be dismissed from the ministry.

To Cruz, such a quota system is totally unacceptable. “It is as if [they are] saying it is okay for a priest or even for a bishop to sire a child, but not more than one. This is pure baloney,” Cruz said in an interview.<sup>12</sup>

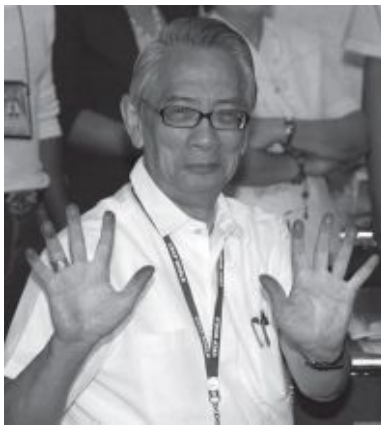
The Canon law, Section B, paragraph 43 in the CBCP pastoral guideline states that “a cleric or religious who lives with a concubine or continues in an external sin against the sixth commandment that causes scandal is to be punished with suspension (Canon 1395)<sup>k12</sup>. Suspension is likewise a just penalty to be imposed on a cleric who fathers a child for violating perfect and perpetual continence (Canon 277) and for causing scandal (Canon 1395).”

“It is as if [they are] saying it is okay for a priest or even for a bishop to sire a child, but not more than one. This is pure baloney.”

The guideline also stated that when it could be determined that the fathering of the child was an isolated case, “the ministry of the priest must be saved.” The diocese, “out of charity,” will assist in helping the priest meet his financial obligation to the child and such expenses will be reimbursed.

Apparently, the bishops took their cue from the Vatican, which rejected the “zero tolerance” policy that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) sought to adopt in June 2002 against pedophile priests in response to the widespread reports of the abuse of minors and children by men of the cloth. If Rome is averse to a “one strike, you are out policy,” how, then, can the CBCP be holier than the Pope?

But Cruz argued that the Vatican rejected the proposed “zero tolerance” policy in the USCCB charter “only if and when the fact of pedophilia has not been sufficiently established or proven prior to the application of the ‘zero tolerance policy.’” The USCCB has since revised the Charter for the Protection of Children and Youth People. In 2005, it approved the revised charter and was given imprimatur by the Vatican on January 1, 2006.<sup>13</sup>



*Retired Lingayen-Dagupan Archbishop Oscar Cruz*

Based on the Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests or Deacons, promulgated in May 2006, a single act of abuse is ground for permanent removal from the priestly ministry and dismissal from clerical state.

The guideline, as it is, does not correct sexual misbehavior but appears to condone it. As a guideline, it does not have the force of law. Moreover, it was not approved by two-thirds of the membership of the CBCP; only the CBCP permanent council gave it a thumbs-up. Cruz argues that to be binding, it should have been approved by the entire plenary.



## WHAT ABOUT VICTIMS OF ABUSE?

The guideline was criticized from within and outside the Church, particularly on how it views victims of clerical sexual abuse. In a paper published in *Asian Horizons*, a theological journal based in India, Father Louie Cartagenas says the guideline suffers from certain limitations.

One is that the perspective of the victim or victims “seems missing if not unwelcome” in the guideline. Paragraph 38 of the guideline states that “care should be ensured to protect the confidentiality of the documentation” of the complaint. Yet, “in comparison, the documents of other local churches are categorical not to impose the obligation of silence among complainants. Besides, in cases where [a] complainant is not satisfied with the outcome, the other protocols obligate [the] concerned church authority to inform the victim about access to a review of process,” Cartagenas pointed out.<sup>14</sup>

Cartagenas, who was a member of the faculty of theology of the San Carlos Major Seminary in Cebu City, observed that the CBCP failed to mention a body that would oversee, monitor, and evaluate its strict implementation. “Such lack, in effect, gives every bishop latitude to implement it or not in his diocese. Anchoring the effectiveness of the protocol on the bishop’s goodwill, rather than on an overseeing body created and mandated by them, is too weak a mechanism to resist the dysfunctional propensities of the ‘clerical club.’ This becomes more problematic as regards the victims’ access to [a] complaints officer, because according to the protocol, when the offender is a bishop and not an ordinary priest, ‘the ecclesiastical superior will initiate the appropriate process.’”<sup>15</sup>

In such a case where the bishop is the offending party, a complainant will most likely face the Pope in Rome or his representative in the Curia. “The time lag for victims to be able to find the courage to come out is therefore compounded by the geographical and cultural distance imposed by ecclesiastical bureaucracy,” Cartagenas said.

The women’s group Linangan ng Kababaihan Inc. (Likhaan) and the Child Justice League Inc. (CJLI), in a report commissioned by Catholics for a Free Choice, said one of the more problematic provisions in the guideline was the CBCP’s contention that between the cleric and the bishop, “there exists a relationship of trust analogous to that between the father and son” and that “it does not belong to the pastoral office of the bishop to denounce a priest to civil authorities.”<sup>16</sup>

Likhaan and CJLI said that “given the inadequacy of Philippine child protection laws, this provision further aggravates the situation” for minors seeking justice. “Moreover, this provision begs several questions: what happens in cases where the priest-offender was caught by the bishop or religious superior in *flagrante delicto*? Or where multiple victims report only one offender? Or where one bishop transfers such an offender to another diocese? Is the receiving bishop assured of complete candor from the sending bishop regarding the cleric’s record, including reports of sexual misconduct?”<sup>17</sup>

Also of concern is the CBCP guideline’s double standard: ensuring confidentiality when a complaint has been lodged, yet demanding a public apology, with recourse to legal suit, when the allegation has been proven false. “While there is no compulsory reporting in the interest of the victims of child abuse, the CBCP is clear about defending itself when an accusation is proven false. Paragraph 39 mandates a very transparent and public action by the bishop or superior in cases where the accusation has been

established as false. Evidently, the church finds use for the civil forum when it proves beneficial to the accused but not when it benefits the children-victims who are minors and are considered vulnerable by law.”<sup>18</sup>

Echoing Cruz’s position on priest-fathers, Likhaan and CJLI also pushed for child molesters to be permanently banned from the priesthood.<sup>19</sup> The CBCP guideline is careful on this one, stating that “if the sexual abuse is verified ... the bishop or the superior will limit the ministry of the individual, or even prohibit, it if warranted. In the case of sexual abuse of a minor, no ministry with minors or unsupervised contact with them will be allowed. In verified cases of criminal behavior, the bishop or superior will recommend that the Promoter of Justice begin a canonical process for appropriate canonical sanctions.”<sup>20</sup>

The guideline however draws the line when the cases involve priests who engage in homosexual relations or activity. If the child is less than 12 years old, the guideline mandates that automatic dismissal of the gay priest should be considered.

In contrast, the Australian Bishops’ Conference, in its own guideline responding to complaints of abuse of Church personnel, was more direct in dealing with child abusers and sexual cases of criminal nature, regardless of the sexual orientation of the priest. Paragraph 27 of the Australian bishops’ guideline stated: “Serious offenders, in particular, those who have been found responsible for sexually abusing a child, or whose record of abuse of pastoral relationships indicates that they could well engage in further sexual exploitation of vulnerable adults, will not be given back the power they have abused. Those who have made the best response to treatment recognize this themselves and realize that they can no longer return to ministry.”<sup>21</sup>

Paragraph 42.5 of the Australian guideline states that the seriousness of the case shall be taken into account in determining the future ministry of the priest who has admitted or was found guilty of abuse. “It is unfair to hold out to a serious offender any hope of a return to ministry when it is clear this is not possible,” it said.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike the CBCP guideline, the Australian one is more preventive in measure; it requires the dismissal of any seminarian or any candidate for priesthood who has been found guilty of sexual assault and other abuse.<sup>23</sup> The CBCP version was silent on this matter.

What about financial support to children sired by priests and reparation for those who are victims of abuse?

For those who have fathered a child but are allowed to remain in the ministry, the CBCP guideline relies on civil laws. It mandates the priest to provide financial support until the child reaches adulthood. If the priest is still in the recovery stage, the diocese will, “out of charity,” assist the priest in meeting his financial obligation. But this appears less of a concern for the child but more for the priest. “Whatever financial help the diocese or religious institute extends is a help to save the ministry of the priest-father,” the guideline said.<sup>24</sup>

As for victims of abuse, the guideline suggests that the offender “should shoulder the expenses attendant to the victim’s therapy.” The diocese, for its part, will try its best, “within its means” to financially assist in the healing process that the victims will undergo, if the offender needs such assistance. “The offender will be required to reimburse the diocese for all expenses incurred in handling the case.”

## REJECTED BY THE VATICAN

In May 2012, the CBCP was supposed to finally adopt the guideline as a binding protocol for all the dioceses. The guideline was submitted to the Vatican for its review and approval. Rome rejected the proposed protocol because of the one-child quota system, Cruz said. He had the last laugh.

It was a slap on the faces of Gaudencio Cardinal Rosales, Antonio Cardinal Tagle, and Bishop Pablo David, who drafted the guideline.

As such, the guideline remains a guideline, without the force of law and not binding to the CBCP members. Bishops may or may not follow the guideline and institute their own procedure according to their desire. Without the Vatican imprimatur, the guideline is now just a piece of paper. (The guideline has been removed from the official CBCP website as of this writing.)<sup>25</sup>

## WHAT NOW?

It is back to square one and it is up to the individual bishops whether to follow the rejected CBCP guideline in the meantime, or tweak it on a case-to-case basis. To the closet fathers, it is a welcome respite, especially if they are under the supervision of a forgiving bishop.

But Cruz is not about to give up. Five years ago, he set up the National Tribunal of Appeal which deals with errant priests. It is a quasi-office in the CBCP since it was not sanctioned by the collegial body of bishops or by Rome. But it acts as a repository of complaints and cases involving priests violating their vow of continence and celibacy.

Cruz explains that bishops who are unsure on how to handle sexual misconduct cases refer theirs to his office. With administrative and financial matters already occupying their time, it helps the bishops address an internal matter that can put a strain on the bishop-priest relationship. Already retired, Cruz said he was more than willing to help. “This is gratis. I do not get any payment for this,” he said.<sup>26</sup>

At any given time, Cruz handles 50 cases of clerics who are in conflict with their vows “or those living scandalous lives.” A case referred to him by a bishop may take six months of investigation. He interviews at least seven to 10 people for each case.

His findings are then forwarded to the bishop for proper action. “Mine is only recommendatory,” he said. His report also contains suggested sanctions against the errant priest, if there is evidence that he was living a double life.

For those who have concubines or children, he recommends automatic removal from the priesthood or the priest may opt to apply for dispensation. Dispensation is the process where a priest is released from the duties and responsibilities connected to his clerical state, such as saying Mass or conferring sacraments.<sup>27</sup> Although the priest loses his clerical state, he is not a layman in the strict sense, since his indelible character as a priest remains with him forever.

P a r t O n e

C H A P T E R 2

THE FALL  
OF THE  
RISING STAR

THEY HAD MANY THINGS IN COMMON: BOTH WERE protégés of Manila Cardinal Jaime Sin; both were former auxiliary bishops of Manila; both at one time worked and taught at the San Carlos Seminary—Bishop Teodoro Bacani as former dean and professor of theology and Bishop Crisostomo Yalung as former rector.

Both were also forced to resign after committing indiscretions involving the opposite sex.

Bacani and Yalung were both promising prelates before their fall from grace. The former was a most-sought-after inspirational speaker, a media personality in his own right, and a public figure largely active in political affairs.

In 1995, Bacani was the first to coin *dagdag-bawas*, the vote-shaving and vote-padding electoral fraud scheme during the midterm polls that year. He was then an active member of the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting, chaired by his good friend, former Ambassador to the Vatican Henrietta de Villa.

Yalung, for his part, was very popular among parishioners but most feared by young priests and seminarians. A rising star in Church circles, he was nurtured by Sin as a potential Church leader, appointing him as treasurer of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Manila (RCAM) when it was hit with financial scandals. Among his contemporaries, his only rival to Sin's attention and favor was Socrates Villegas, who would become archbishop a few years later. (Sin had prophesied that Villegas would one day become the Archbishop of Manila).

If Sin was grooming for a successor, that would have been a toss-up between Villegas and Yalung.

But in a span of one year, Sin lost two of his most favored bishops to successive scandals—Yalung for fathering two children and Bacani for “an inappropriate display of affection” to his former secretary. Yalung was the first to go, followed 10 months later by Bacani.

Their cases reflected the growing sensitivity of the Vatican over issues of sex and indiscretions—controversies that were normally swept under the rug before sex scandals involving Catholic priests, bishops, and archbishops spread in Europe and spilled into the United States.



*Bishop Crisostomo Yalung*

In these two instances, the Vatican acted swiftly, although those in the local Church had long been ignoring the signs.

In truth, rumors about the alleged extra-curricular affairs of Bacani and Yalung had swirled even before they were caught in the spotlight of controversy. Anonymous letters about their supposed affairs had been sent to the RCAM and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, perpetuating idle talk in Church circles.<sup>1</sup>

Their cases are a microcosm of how Church superiors handle cases of sexual dalliances involving prelates—a conspiracy of silence on the pretext of an internal Church investigation. They show a Church which put its blind trust in its erring members, amid the mounting evidence and calls by lay leaders for an immediate investigation; a Church that was more concerned in protecting the privacy of its erring members than the welfare of the victim or victims; and a Church that was quick to condemn the other party as guilty, yet just as fast to absolve its erring member.

The Church was quick to demand loyalty and accountability from the lay, but was unfaithful to its own preachings.

In these cases, Church members, including its activist sector, suddenly clammed up, bowing to pressures from superiors to keep the lid closed while they settled the matter among themselves. The Church moved on, as if it were business as usual, leaving the aggrieved parties to fend for themselves.

The Church also shot down the messenger of bad news, conveniently forgetting that it was supposed to bear witness to the truth. It treated the media as its enemy, when news organizations were merely reporting what was happening in the Church's own backyard.

## BISHOP YALUNG'S CASE

The case of Yalung had all the above elements. A small clique in Church circles had been aware of his extra-curricular affair. Bespectacled, short and with *chinito* eyes, Yalung could pass for a college freshman. “He was charming in his own way. He was a natural magnet for old ladies,” said a Church layman.

But beneath his youthful exterior was a contradiction of character. To parishioners, especially the rich and the big donors, he was the affable bishop—easy to approach, witty, and a good conversationalist. But to some seminarians and some priests, he was the strict rector and a stern disciplinarian. “One mistake and you were banished to the province,” one priest described Yalung in an earlier interview. “To him, there is no such thing as second chance.”<sup>2</sup>

Appointed at 40, Yalung was one of the youngest bishops. He enjoyed the backing of Cardinal Sin and former CBCP president Archbishop Oscar Cruz who both served as his consecrators when he was ordained as bishop.

“When people ask how I am related to Bishop Tom, he would say ‘pamangkin’ [niece]. They were wondering why he was so concerned about me.”

Early on, he was exposed to the life of the rich and famous. He was a Young Turk, the apple of Sin’s eye, one of his most trusted. He held several positions in Church corporations: as board member of the Bank of the Philippine Islands, where the Church is a major stockholder,<sup>3</sup> chairman of the Church-run travel agency Catholic Travel Inc. and chairman of Fidelity Insurance Inc.

It was at the Sacred Heart Parish in Makati where Yalung’s dangerous liaisons first surfaced. Makati parishioners first noticed his special friendship with a rich Church patroness. The woman, in her early 50s, was clearly smitten with the bishop, who was then in his mid-40s.

“I think the woman was in love with Bishop Yalung but it was not reciprocated,” a parishioner said. Tongues wagged, “but we have no evidence they had an affair.”<sup>4</sup>

It was a special friendship that eventually turned sour after another woman, who was in her late 20s, entered the picture. The woman was Christine Rances.

Rances said she met the bishop sometime in November 2000, at the National Shrine of the Sacred Heart in San Antonio Village, Makati, where he was the parish priest.<sup>5</sup>

In an interview in 2003, Rances told us she had sought out Yalung to confess. But other sources said she sought counseling about her ongoing affair with a priest. Indeed, Rances was having an affair with the priest who solemnized her marriage. “She has a certain weakness for men [of the] cloth,” the Makati



parishioner who staked out Rances said.



*Jaime Cardinal Sin*

Soon after, she and Yalung became “text-mates.” Texting was eventually replaced with Yalung making visits to her parents’ home in Pasay where they “would talk.” Soon, they would go out, in the company of friends and her brother. “He loves to eat. We would go to fancy restaurants. Of course, his treat,” Rances said in that interview.

Evidently, Rances, who was already separated from her husband by the time she was dating Yalung and who had apparently ended her affair with the previous priest, was in love with the bishop. They would later go out alone, watching movies or dining out. “I felt secure. And he was so handsome,” Rances recalled.

Rances, who was in her mid-20s at the time, was not a stunning beauty. But she was charming and wily, in a way. It was just a matter of time before she, the vamp, and Yalung, the strict disciplinarian, would have an affair. After a month of dating, she and Yalung were officially “on.” At that time, Yalung was on his sixth year as bishop.

It was an affair that the two tried to keep a secret but their actions gave them away. She would be in the constant company of Yalung. Their age difference—she was 23 and he was 47—raised eyebrows. “When people ask how I am related to Bishop Tom, he would say ‘pamangkin’ [niece]. They were wondering why he was so concerned about me,” Rances said.

When she needed treatment for a nosebleed, Yalung took her to the Church-run San Juan de Dios Hospital. When she celebrated her birthday, Yalung arranged it to be held at the Hospicio de San Jose, “because I love children,” she said.

The older female Makati parishioner, in the meantime, was getting jealous of the blossoming “friendship” between Yalung and Rances. For Rances, the feeling was mutual—she would not tolerate any

rival for Yalung's affections.

Less than a year after the affair started, Rances confronted the older female parishioner if she and Yalung had an affair. Not contented, she told the older female that she and Yalung were an item. "She got a slap from FV [initials of the older female]," a witness said.

Still, they did not believe Rances, thinking she was delusional. FV informed Yalung about the encounter to warn him, but the bishop appeared blinded by love. Meanwhile, unsigned letters began circulating in Makati about the supposed affair. It also reached the doorsteps of the CBCP and the RCAM.

Following the slapping incident and her own admission, Rances threatened to file legal charges against those spreading gossip about her affair with Yalung. She sent a letter to FV, accusing her of spreading the rumors. In that letter, she backtracked, claiming she and Yalung were only friends.

About a year into the affair, in October 2001, Yalung, then 48, added another feather to his cap after he was appointed to the third richest diocese in the Philippines—the diocese of Antipolo. (The first two are Manila and Cebu). It was a relief in more ways than one. The promotion also allowed the secret lovers a welcome respite from the talks in Makati.

## DOUBLE LIFE

With his transfer to Antipolo, it was inevitable that Rances would follow him there. The two found an apartment in one of the subdivisions and in January 2002, they lived together like husband and wife in their P8,000-a-month apartment.

To go by the statements of the secret lovers' neighbors, the relationship was a "noisy" one, punctuated by frequent fights and the sounds of china being smashed.

With her easygoing personality and generosity, Rances easily cultivated friendships with her new neighbors. "She'd invite us for lunch or dinner at her unit," one of the neighbors said.

But there were things that puzzled her neighbors. She would tell some of them she was a former flight stewardess, while to others, she claimed she was a former commercial model. When asked about her husband, after noticing that she was pregnant, Rances said her better half was working overseas.

The neighbors, however, would notice that she had a frequent visitor, a man "in his 50s." If the neighbors were loitering around the compound, the visitor would not alight from his car. He would leave just before the break of dawn, and sometimes, around 3 p.m. on Sundays. Rances would later tell her neighbors that the elderly man was her father. To others, he was her uncle.

Yalung's actuations also aroused the curiosity of the neighborhood, which was composed mostly of Iglesia ni Cristo members. He would sometimes drop by still wearing his clerical collar, identified with priests and other members of the clergy. The neighbors concluded he was a priest, evidenced by the things he would bring to the apartment. "Sometimes, the goodies were wrapped in a manner indicating they were Church offerings. Many kinds ... fruits, food, a sack of rice."<sup>6</sup>

Her friendly relations with the neighbors ended one night when they could no longer tolerate the noise of Rances's and Yalung's fights. They filed a public scandal complaint with the barangay officials. She apologized but she also severed her ties with the neighbors. The feeling was reciprocated.

Sought out for interviews, the neighbors were more than willing to spill the beans. The neighbors also related that Rances had dismissed her maid, Maricel, on suspicion that she was trying to seduce the bishop. The maid begged in the streets, and a sympathetic neighbor gave her temporary shelter.

## BISHOP'S PLEA

Yalung's unstoppable ascent put him in the spotlight with other members of the Church hierarchy. One lay leader, who stalked Yalung and Rances, admitted that he was prodded by another young bishop to investigate the affair.<sup>7</sup>

In one Church event held at the Papal Nunciature, the Makati parishioner and the young bishop (who became an archbishop) were engaging in banter when the bishop asked the parishioner about the veracity of the rumors involving Yalung and an unidentified woman. "The bishop asked me to look into the allegations. I was surprised since I thought they were good friends."

This lay leader, still active in Church affairs, vowed to get to the bottom of the alleged relationship. "As I went into my car, he kissed my hand, and said 'Do it.'" That was when the Makati parishioner decided to follow Yalung.

Why would a bishop encourage a discreet probe against a colleague? The source was clueless about the young bishop's motive. "Maybe he wanted the truth, maybe for his peace of mind."

The sleuthing took several months. Learning that Rances had also moved to Antipolo, the next challenge was to locate her exact address. It was not long before this self-anointed crusader found the love nest.

On April 28, 2002, determined to uncover the truth, he went to the subdivision where the couple lived. He was in luck. Outside a cluster of apartments was a Honda VTEC which he recognized as belonging to Yalung. He was surprised to see Rances staying in one of the units there.

Still, he wanted to give Yalung the benefit of the doubt. "I thought maybe he was just visiting the girl." The parishioner waited and waited for the bishop to leave the compound, until he fell asleep.

At the break of dawn, at around 5 a.m., he was stirred from his sleep when Yalung's Honda showed signs of life. Then, finally, he saw Yalung. The source would later describe his reaction in a letter sent to Yalung: "I asked God why He made me a witness to this awful situation."<sup>8</sup>

That same day, he called up Yalung's close friends, including then-Manila Mayor Joselito Atienza. They decided they would call Yalung's attention at the right time. But someone contacted Yalung's secretary, who, in turn, informed Yalung about the stake-out. When the group found this out, they decided to write a letter to Yalung, advising him to seek help "while there is still time."

"I asked God why He made me a witness to this awful situation."

The group also demanded an explanation, perhaps still hoping that Yalung would clear up the matter. But they did not get any reply. Instead, it was Rances who issued the rebuttal. In a letter, she denied that she and Yalung were having an affair, but confirmed she was pregnant.

## CHURCH FUNDS PILFERED?

In June, the Papal Nuncio, the CBCP, and Sin received letters from some scandalized parishioners detailing the relationship. They asked for an investigation and, later, Yalung's removal as bishop. "We did not get any reply from those letters. They were ignoring us," the source, who was one of the letter writers, said.

Still, they kept on sending letters to Church higher-ups, in the hope that they would care to listen.

The one who followed Yalung, however, would not give up easily. At a Papal function in the Nunciature also that June, he approached Monsignor Pedro Quitarro, who was then the acting secretary-general of the CBCP, to follow up their letter of complaint against Yalung. Quitarro said the allegations were serious and should be substantiated by evidence.

By this time, the Church leadership finally listened.

In a sign that something was wrong, the RCAM appointed a "moderator" of the Antipolo diocese's finances, which was an obvious insult to Yalung, having held the position of former treasurer of RCAM. It was the first time that a "moderator" was appointed. (A "moderator," who could be a bishop or a priest of high standing, is usually sent to fix a problem in a diocese or a parish.)

Was the Church suspecting that Yalung was spiriting away money from the Church coffers for his growing family?

Rances's maid, Maricel, would relate to the neighbors that her boss would instruct her to withdraw P50,000 to P70,000 from Yalung's two ATM accounts from time to time. She also said Rances had P4 million in her own account.

Neighbors wondered how Rances could have accumulated such savings. She was jobless, but she could still afford some luxuries. When I went to their apartment, parked outside her unit was a Starex van, which she told neighbors was given by her "uncle."

On November 14, 2002, Yalung resigned as bishop (although the website, [catholic-hierarchy.org](http://catholic-hierarchy.org), indicated he resigned on December 7, 2002).<sup>9</sup>

On November 16, on the advice of his superiors, he fled to the United States for some soul-searching.

But not before leaving Rances and their child something to hold on to.

When interviewed by *Newsbreak* in January 2003, Rances showed a document which was purportedly Yalung's will. It included a supposed P4 million deposit; accounts worth P1 million and P300,000, and a \$16,000 time deposit—all at Standard Chartered Bank in Ortigas. Was it possible that all this money was pilfered from the Church?

Shortly after the report came out in *Newsbreak* in 2003, several Makati parishioners called our office to say they had given Yalung generous donations. They wondered if the money was used for the intended purposes of the donors.

Yalung gave broad hints about this, saying he had “committed quite a few mistakes, some administrative, others personal or relational,” in a January 5, 2003, letter that *Newsbreak* obtained.

## A BISHOP FOR A FATHER

Perhaps what sealed Yalung's fate was when Rances gave birth to their first child—at the then-Church-operated Cardinal Santos Medical Center—on June 7, 2002. (The hospital was later taken over by a private group.)<sup>10</sup>

Based on the birth certificate that Rances showed then, Yalung affixed his signature indicating he was the father. In the space indicating the father's occupation, Yalung wrote “religious worker.”

The birth certificate provided undeniable proof that Yalung had fathered a child with Rances, which some Church officials sought to deny. “They say that the bishop's signature was forged,” Rances told us. She only got the child's birth certificate months after the birth, on December 20, 2002.<sup>11</sup>

It was a single birth, but Church officials were initially misled into thinking that Rances gave birth to twins. While *Newsbreak* was investigating the scandal, top Church leaders asked if it was indeed a twin birth.

Rances was also telling neighbors that she gave birth to twins, and that one child had to be incubated at the hospital. But by then, the neighbors already knew her charade. They said she claimed she had twins to fleece more money from the bishop.

## ELABORATE COVER-UP

If the Church kept quiet about its own investigation, it also certainly kept quiet about Yalung's resignation. Officially, it announced Yalung's resignation during a press conference announcing the creation of new dioceses carved out from the Archdiocese of Manila sometime in December 2002.<sup>12</sup>

In a statement, the CBCP said Yalung had resigned without offering any explanation. The resignation did not arouse any suspicion as the Church highlighted the news about the division of the Archdiocese of Manila.

A source privy to the goings-on in the CBCP and the RCAM said they timed the announcement of RCAM's division to downplay Yalung's resignation. "Reporters would be asking the implication of the RCAM's division on the cardinal's political influence. They would naturally be more interested about the supposed clipping of Cardinal Sin's power than the resignation of one bishop," the source said.<sup>13</sup> "If anyone asked, the standard answer would be, 'For health reasons,'" the source added.

By the time it was announced, Yalung had left for the United States.

Rances said her lover bade her goodbye on November 13, 2002, telling her he would go on a sabbatical. Two days later, Yalung was gone, leaving Rances pregnant with their second child.

The Church had all the reasons to keep his case hush-hush. At that time, the Church was in the thick of preparations for the 4th World Day of Families which the RCAM was hosting in January 2003. Pope John Paul II was invited to attend, but cancelled the plan due to his deteriorating health.<sup>14</sup>

Within the Church, two factions emerged: one pushed to sweep the scandal under the rug while another group argued the Church should come clean. Those who favored secrecy won.

And part of the cover-up was to persuade Rances against coming out with her story.

Before *Newsbreak* was able to track down Rances and interview her, some Church officials were already in touch with her. Monsignor Hernando Coronel, who was then the RCAM treasurer, met her several times purportedly to ensure that she did not disclose her story. But she refused to be tamed.

By some stroke of luck, Rances agreed to be interviewed. She related her affair with Yalung. She initially agreed to be interviewed for a second time, but backed out several times until she became *incommunicado*.

The cover-up extended to Manila priests who had no idea about what had happened.

Monsignor Nico Bautista, one of our sources then, described a meeting convened by the RCAM among Manila priests on November 22, 2002, after rumors of Yalung's departure to the US had circulated. He recalled then Bishop Socrates Villegas telling other priests that Yalung was just on leave and that he remained Antipolo bishop. Another meeting would be called, on December 11, but only to inform the clergy that Bishop Gabriel Reyes was the new Antipolo bishop.<sup>15</sup>

Reyes's installation as new Antipolo bishop was without fanfare, unlike other similar Church rites.



Thus, most Antipolo parishioners were not aware of the change. Was Reyes's hushed appointment part of the cover-up?

During a visit to the Antipolo Cathedral (the Shrine of Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage) sometime in January 2003, parishioners were still clueless as to why Yalung had resigned. Apparently, there was no explanation for his sudden exit. Even in his supposed letter dated January 5, 2003, which was addressed to the "clergy, religious and the faithful of Antipolo," there was only a vague hint about the reasons behind his abrupt departure.

We talked with some parishioners and some religious members, who said they had not seen the letter. When shown the letter, chancery staff said it was the first time they saw it.

In that January 5 letter, Yalung explained that he "left the diocese not to flee but to let the local Church continue to grow and to serve. I love the Church and the God-given vocation to serve Her. I gave my best to the Church ... I have also committed quite a few mistakes, some administrative, others personal and relational."

As for Rances, she said some staff of the Cardinal Santos Medical Center, contesting the authenticity of the father's signature, tried to prevent her from registering the birth certificate of her newborn, where Yalung signed as the father.

She was also left in the dark about where Yalung was. Already pregnant with Yalung's second child in 2002, she had to demand an audience with the Papal Nuncio to figure out her lover's whereabouts. On her second meeting with the Nuncio in December 2002, Rances was told that "from now on, consider yourself as the mother and father of your child."

(Shortly after interviewing Rances, I received text messages from an unidentified person claiming that she was telling a lie and had misled others. The sender introduced himself/herself as a reporter who had also interviewed Rances but had been warned by some that she was capable of mischief.)

## FINANCIAL SUPPORT FROM CHURCH

Initially, Rances told me that she and Yalung still communicated via text messages. But at the time of the interview, she said communication with Yalung had stopped. Desperation was etched on her face. She asked if I could help locate Yalung, believing that her lover was just somewhere in the Philippines. She did not know that Yalung had left for the US.

She said overdue bills had been piling up and that she fired her maid to minimize expenses. She said she might be forced to sell her Starex van (given by her uncle, she said, but her neighbors claimed it was actually a gift from Yalung) for her mounting expenses. “I have to feed my child, bring her to doctors, put something on the table. I have no work,” she said. She was also expecting their second child.

When she met the Nuncio for the last time, there was no discussion on how the Church would help in shouldering the expenses. This meant she had to fend for herself from then on.

One knowledgeable source said the RCAM provides support for children sired by Manila priests. But Rances disputed this, saying she had not received any financial help from anyone.

When Bacani became embroiled in his own scandal six months later, a pregnant Rances went to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* office and asked that she be interviewed. She brought along her first-born child with Yalung and asked that the paper publish her photos with the child.<sup>16</sup> The paper did not oblige, though, taking only a photo of a distraught Rances.

In that interview, Rances insisted that the Church officials were hiding Yalung and that she continued to suffer from the scandal. “Women are always the losers in this kind of game. When we are abused, Church officials condemn us, as if they do not have mothers.”

Rances also claimed that she “had received no financial support whatsoever from Yalung or the Church” and that she was trying to make ends meet using her savings from when she was a medical representative. (In her interview with *Newsbreak*, she said she was a former model.)

She also threatened to file a case in court to seek financial support for her children. “I want him to come back to help me support our children. But I no longer want us to live as husband and wife under one roof. When he comes to me sick, I am willing to accept him, but not as a lover. I am still young with a future ahead of me. He is already old—and a priest at that. I just want to work and give our children a good life.”

## CHILDREN OF THE LESSER GOD

Monsignor Pedro Qutorio, in an interview back then, said the Church as an institution provided no financial support to children begotten by priests or even by bishops. “It is not the responsibility of the parish or the diocese, it is the responsibility of the erring priest. If we give support, it would appear that the Church is condoning the misdeeds of its members. You cannot put a system to a sin.”

Former Archbishop Oscar Cruz put it in more colorful language: “*Ano sila sinusuwerte? Gagawa-gawa ng milagro tapos Simbahan ang aayos?*” (Who do they think they are, feeling lucky? They make a mess and let the Church fix it?)<sup>17</sup>

At the time, the CBCP guideline on clergy misconduct was being drafted. It was approved in 2005. In the document, the CBCP says it is the moral responsibility of the priest to provide support to their child or children.<sup>18</sup>

This encouraged Rances to be creative in making money. A Church source, named as godfather to Yalung’s second child, said Rances had the infant baptized not once but several times. “Obviously, she just wanted to make money out of it,” he said.

In August 2012, I was able to get in touch with Rances through her cell phone. She was living in a condominium in Sta. Mesa, Manila. Just like in previous requests for interviews, she initially agreed, only to back out later.

## WHAT ABOUT YALUNG?

Yalung, meanwhile, was living in Sacramento, California, in a six-bedroom house in his name with an estimated value of \$288,000. He bought the house in 2002 for \$301,000 at \$102 per square foot.<sup>19</sup> He was staying there with his father and mother.

While in exile in the US, Yalung enrolled at the California State University in Sacramento and took up a master's degree in social work. His thesis was titled "The Contribution and Influence of Spirituality and Religion on Filipino Caregivers' Motivations and Services."

One graduate student, Diana Peck of the California State University, acknowledged Yalung in her thesis "for his gracious gift of time, sense of humor and spiritual nature." He has reinvented himself as a counselor, holding office also in Sacramento.<sup>20</sup>

I sent a letter to Yalung at his residence in Sacramento, requesting an interview. He did not reply. Former journalist Aldwin Fajardo, who was living in Sacramento, called Yalung's office on my behalf, also requesting for an interview. Fajardo left three messages in his voice mail but did not get any return messages.

On the fourth try, Yalung finally picked up the phone. When Fajardo told the other person on the line that he was looking for Bishop Crisostomo Yalung, he answered: "Yes, this is Tom Yalung." When told about the request for an interview, Yalung said: "Sorry, I am respectfully declining the interview." He also rejected a request to send him a letter with our questions.<sup>21</sup>

The fallen bishop appeared to have put the past behind him and resumed a normal life.

P a r t O n e

C H A P T E R 3

THE SECRET  
CASE OF  
BISHOP ALMARIO

ONE NIGHT IN JANUARY 1996, MALOLOS BISHOP CIRILO Almario received an unlikely visitor in Leonardo Legaspi, the archbishop of Caceres. The timing of the visit, at an ungodly hour at that, was somehow foreboding.

It was no ordinary visit. Legaspi arrived at the Malolos diocese “Gestapo style,” one source familiar with the case said. Almario—who, just days before the unannounced visit, even inaugurated the convent of the Religious Catechists of Mary in Sta. Isabel, Bulacan—could not have prepared for what was going to hit him.

Almario, a native of Caridad, Cavite, and Legaspi, of Meycauayan, Bulacan, had been the best of friends. That night, their friendship would be severely tested.

Legaspi told Almario that he was sent by the outgoing Papal Nuncio, Archbishop Antonio Franco,<sup>1</sup> on a mission that had to do with a matter of great concern. It involved the corruption of minors. Almario apparently abused some of the young seminarians studying at the Immaculate Conception Minor Seminary.

“He had received orders from Rome to cleanse the seminary and the diocese of the abomination,” the source continued. Legaspi confirmed this. He had the choice of passing on the responsibility to others but he said, “Rome had its orders and I had to follow.”<sup>2</sup>

The two talked behind closed doors until three o’clock in the morning. At one point, Almario pleaded with Legaspi “to help him.”<sup>3</sup> Legaspi replied: “Tell me everything you have to say and I will include that in my report.”

That night was also the start of the bitter parting between the two best friends.

Almario pleaded for Legaspi to help clear his name. Legaspi, a member of the religious group Order of Preachers/Dominicans, was noncommittal. “I cannot distort the facts,” he told Almario. It was a signal to the bishop that his best friend was there as an apostolic visitor and not as an ally. An apostolic visitor is tasked by the Vatican to investigate a special circumstance in a diocese and make a report to the Holy See.

For the next five days, Legaspi busied himself with the investigation, with a deadline given by the Holy See. “I was told to finish the investigation in five days. I was interviewing people nonstop,” he recalled.

Legaspi said he had the smoking gun—an affidavit executed by one seminarian who was allegedly abused. At the time of the investigation, the young man had already left the seminary.



*Bishop Cirilo Almario of Malolos, Bulacan*

As a good friend of Almario's and having spent all his life in the vocation, Legaspi was aware of Almario's sexual orientation. "I've been with the Church a long time," Legaspi said when asked about it. But he was hardly bothered by it. After all, Almario had behaved like most holy men, that is, until the scandal within the confines of the seminary broke out.

Still, Almario said he was "not surprised," when he received Rome's orders. But his findings shocked him. There were six other priests assigned in the seminary who were involved in the sex abuse scandal.

After five days, Legaspi wrapped up his probe. Investigating his good friend and preparing the report that caused his resignation "was very painful," Legaspi recalled. "We never spoke with each other again after that."

## RESIGNED IN SHAME

Almario reigned for 19 years as the Church Prince of Malolos, first assuming the bishopric in 1977. In 1973, he was appointed apostolic administrator there by Pope Paul VI.<sup>4</sup> Four years later, he became the second bishop of Malolos, replacing Bishop Manuel del Rosario.

At the time of his appointment, Almario was the secretary-general of the CBCP (from 1976 to 1981) and once chaired the CBCP Public Affairs Committee and the Commission on Biblical Apostolate.<sup>5</sup>

In 1983, he founded the Immaculate Conception Major Seminary, which is now the wellspring of priests for Bulacan. In 1989, he established the Immaculate Conception for Boys, a private Catholic high school, with “Holiness in Wisdom” as its motto.

When Legaspi was drafting the vision and mission of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II), he tapped Almario among the Church stalwarts to help him. The PCP II sought to transform the Church in the Philippines, not only as a community of disciples, but also a Church of the poor.

When the Philippine Church hosted the Asian Congress on Evangelization in November 1992, Almario was the executive chairman.<sup>6</sup> Thus, within Church circles, Almario was among those highly respected and well-loved.

But in 1996, at 64 years of age, 11 years before the mandatory retirement for bishops and archbishops (70 for priests and 75 for bishops and archbishops), Almario was forced out of the Church he had served his entire life.

The circumstances of his abrupt resignation have been one of the Church’s best-kept secrets.



## SILENCE OF THE LAMB

The crime scene was at the Immaculate Conception Minor Seminary in Guiguinto, Bulacan. The minor seminary is located in the same compound as the major seminary. The seminary prides itself on having produced priests who are now assigned in Bulacan.<sup>7</sup>

Like a family embarrassment that was never discussed openly, it was something a select few in the Church hierarchy knew. Some bishops were in the dark, but others had a vague idea of what happened behind the gated compound of the seminary. After all, the men of the cloth are not above juicy gossip.

Among the few who really knew what transpired was Legaspi, who prepared the only report that was sent to the Vatican. In an institution that puts a premium on confidentiality, Legaspi was ordered by the Vatican not to keep a second copy and, as an obedient son of the Church, he complied.

We sought the side of Almario, twice paying a visit at the convent of the Religious Catechists of Mary, which served as the bishop's retirement residence. On our first and second tries, we were met by the nuns who were taking care of Almario and attending to his daily needs.

During the first visit, we were told that the resigned bishop was not around. We left a handwritten letter addressed to Almario, requesting an interview about the incident at the Immaculate Conception seminary and his own version of the event. We were, however, careful not to be specific in that letter, broadly hinting about the incident for fear that the nuns might read it. On our second visit, the nuns informed us that Almario was nursing an ailment and could not entertain us.

We also sent an e-mail to then-Infanta Bishop Rolando Tirona, who was appointed apostolic administrator to the Malolos diocese after Almario was ousted. An apostolic administrator is appointed when the bishop in the area has been incapacitated for some reason. Tirona's task was to cleanse the mess created by the scandal. Tirona did not respond. (He became archbishop of Nueva Caceres.)<sup>8</sup>

Unlike the case of Bishop Crisostomo Yalung, there was no official announcement from the CBCP about Almario's resignation—not even a passing one. The Church tried to keep the lid on Yalung's resignation. But in Almario's case, there was no need since he slowly faded away. Almario also did not issue any statement or any explanation as to why he had to leave the diocese.

## DECISIVE ACTION

Based on interviews with three sources, the case involved the carnal corruption of several young seminarians. Almario, who was already in his 60s, and several priests were reportedly involved. It was not clear whether it had been going on for some time before it was discovered. But one seminarian was willing to reveal the homosexual activities that went on within the gated seminary. Another source said there were other seminarians who were also sexually abused.

Legaspi said he submitted his report to Rome and it was the Holy See that decided on Almario's case. Asked if Almario was denied due process and that the sanction was too punitive, Legaspi replied, "I do not think he was denied due process. I can assure you that. He was given the chance to explain his side."

As the standard practice for bishops involved in sexual misdemeanors, Rome asked Almario to resign. On January 20, 1996, Almario tendered his resignation.<sup>9</sup>

With all the sexual scandals besetting the Church, Legaspi said Rome acted decisively on Almario's case. "If it involves minors, Rome is very strict." The seminarians at the Minor Seminary were all in their teens. Also ordered removed were the seminary rector and other priests teaching there. Acting on strict orders, Legaspi only prepared a single report and was instructed, under pain of sin, not to share his findings with other bishops. To do so would be in grave violation of the confidentiality imposed on the case. "If it means destroying the computer or laptop that you used in preparing the report, you have to do it," one Church lawyer explained.

The secrecy and the confidentiality somehow worked. Long-time priests in Malolos we talked to said they were not aware of the scandal. Current Malolos Bishop Jose Oliveros, who was ordained as bishop in 2000, also said he was not aware of the incident.<sup>10</sup> It was as if it never happened.

At the CBCP, there was a lot of speculation when word on Almario's sudden resignation spread. The official reason given was poor health. But every bishop knew that citing poor health was the standard alibi for bishops in trouble.

## ‘MY END IS NEAR’

Almario, however, did not leave the diocese of Malolos. Instead of disappearing, he stayed at the convent of the Religious Catechists of Mary. He also was able to concelebrate Masses and attend some of the Church’s official functions. Every year, he celebrates his birthday at the seminary. On a visit to the place, there were students in the minor and major seminaries of the Immaculate Conception present—the future priests of the country. There was no memory of the ghastly incident that happened 16 years ago.

The 81-year-old Almario was still in good health despite having undergone a quadruple heart bypass. But his stride was slow, taking steps with much difficulty. A male nurse helped take care of him, along with the nuns of the convent.

“If you are going to besmirch me, I hope you won’t. I am about to die and [am] just waiting for the Lord to take me.”

If he was guilty or was bothered by his conscience, it certainly did not show when I finally met him.

On November 8, 2012, on my third try, I chanced upon Almario alone, praying the rosary at the chapel inside the convent. Informed by the nurse that he had a visitor, the bishop cut short his prayers and said he had received the two earlier interview requests. “I have nothing more to say. That was a long time ago,” he said and dismissed us.<sup>11</sup>

He resumed praying the rosary before the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. I interrupted him, saying that I knew what had happened at his beloved seminary. I also told him that we were going to publish the story and that it was important that I get his side. “I’m done as a bishop. I have amnesia,” he said in a tone that sought understanding.

When I pressed on, he said: “If you are going to besmirch me, I hope you won’t. I am about to die and [am] just waiting for the Lord to take me,” he said, avoiding my gaze and looking directly at the statue of Our Lady. “I hope you won’t come up with the story.” Then, showing me ten beads on his rosary, he said, “I’m offering these ten Hail Marys for you.”



*Scene of the crime. Photo by Jun Tizon*

The nurse signaled for me to end the conversation. Almario is prone to high-blood pressure, the nurse said. “If his voice rises a decibel higher, so may his blood pressure.”

What happened to the victim or victims of sexual abuse?

Legaspi could not say for sure what had happened. “My orders were just to prepare and submit the report.” But one thing is sure: there was no complaint filed in the courts.

## GAY PRIESTS

Like any human institution, the Church is not spared of homosexual members. The Church is divine as well as human after all. Some of the gay priests occupy high rungs in the hierarchy; a few are even bishops.

To be sure, there are homosexual priests who are able to live holy lives, be celibate and true to their vocation. In the Philippines, some of them rise as bishops, with their brethren knowing and fully accepting their sexual orientation—as long as they do not act out their sexual instincts.

In the same manner that there are heterosexual priests who indulge in the sins of the flesh, there are homosexual priests who violate their vow of chastity.

Following the sexual misconduct scandals that have hit Europe and the United States, and have drained the finances of many Catholic dioceses, the Church has taken measures to tightly screen those aspiring to be priests.

In the same way that the Church has banned women from being priests, the Church has maintained a policy of discouraging or refusing homosexuals from joining the priesthood. While the Church distinguishes between the homosexual himself and the homosexual acts—it deems the latter intrinsically evil—there is nevertheless a bias, preventing them from joining the priesthood. The Church maintains that “although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder.”<sup>12</sup>

On June 29, 2008, the Vatican’s Congregation for Catholic Education issued the “Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in the Admission and Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood,” which tackled the psychological and mental screening of potential candidates.<sup>13</sup> The document did not mention homosexuality, replacing it with terms such as “erroneous visions of sexuality,” “stable sense of masculinity,” “psychic disturbances,” and so on.

The document calls for the initial discernment “right from the moment when the candidate presents himself for admission to the seminary,” and the formator should have the capacity “to be able accurately comprehend his personality; potentialities; dispositions.” The formator refers to the one screening the prospective candidates to the seminary.

It reminded formators that “the timely discernment of possible problems that block the vocational journey can only be of great benefit for the person, for the vocational institutions, and for the Church. Such problems include excessive affective dependency; disproportionate aggression; insufficient capacity for being faithful to obligations taken on; insufficient capacity for establishing serene relations of openness, trust and fraternal collaboration, as well as collaboration with authority; a sexuality identity that is confused or not yet well-defined.”

The same congregation earlier issued on November 4, 2005, the “Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in view of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders,” which warned of the “the negative consequences that can

derive from the ordination of persons with deep-seated homosexual tendencies.”<sup>14</sup>

In the local Church, the Archdiocese of Manila, during the time of Manila Cardinal Jaime Sin, issued a guideline that called for the careful screening of seminarians, especially those with homosexual tendencies. This came about after a spate of alleged abuses of minors by Manila priests were reported in the media. For its part, the CBCP, in paragraph 52 of its guidelines for sexual abuse and clerical misconduct, urged dioceses and religious institutes to review their screening process for candidates in seminaries and make it “more effective in discerning the capacity of candidates to lead celibate lives and to maintain responsible relationships.”

But this story is neither just about the Church taking a more stringent measure in screening out gays nor the presence of homosexual clergymen, many of whom have distinguished themselves as faithful and loyal sons of the Holy Mother Church. It is about how the Church acts when the infraction is committed by one of its anointed princes. It is about a Church that denies reparation to a victim, acting as if no offense to another human being has been committed. It is about a Church exercising justice with mercy to erring members, but denying the same to the victim.

## SHAKEDOWN

At the time of Almario's resignation in 1996, the Churches in Europe and in the United States were grappling with unprecedented sex scandals—from heterosexual to homosexual indiscretions, to the abuse of minors—testing the faith of Catholics worldwide. Across the board, priests and bishops were found guilty.

In 1993, New Mexico Archbishop Robert Sanchez, America's first Hispanic archbishop, resigned after he confessed to engaging in sexual affairs with five parishioners.<sup>15</sup> A year before, in 1992, Galway Bishop Eamonn Casey of Ireland resigned after the mother of his teenage son filed a paternity suit.<sup>16</sup>

But it is sexual abuse committed by pedophile priests that have hurt the Church most—morally and financially. According to the website BishopAccountability.org, in the US alone, monetary settlements reached a total of \$3 billion, arising from the 3,000 cases filed since 1950. Of the 3,000 cases, 41 have gone to trial.<sup>17</sup>

So far, as of 2010, the Los Angeles diocese shelled out the highest settlement amount—\$660 million—in a case involving 508 victims and 221 priests, brothers, lay teachers and church employees. This was followed by the San Diego diocese (\$198.1 million) in a case involving 144 victims; the Oregon Province of the Jesuits (\$166.1 million) involving 500 victims; the Orange diocese in California (\$100 million) involving 91 victims; and the Boston diocese (\$84.250 million) involving 552 victims.

In 2004, the John Jay College of Criminal Justice released a report commissioned by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops which found that 4,392 priests, representing four percent of those covered by the study from 1950-2002, were involved in child sexual abuse. The report determined that more than 10,000 individuals had made allegations of child sexual abuse, where 6,700 accusations had been substantiated.<sup>18</sup>

## WHAT ABOUT IN THE PHILIPPINES?

Scandals involving higher-ups were just imploding. The CBCP has yet to commission a similar study on sexual abuses, with allegations and cases reported by the media from time to time. The Church's standard response is that these are isolated cases. But how did they deal with sexual abuses before the CBCP guideline on sexual misconduct was drafted? The standard operating procedure was to transfer the errant priest from one assignment to another.

A few complainants have gone to court, but not a single case has prospered. One reason is the prevailing cultural and social milieu wherein an affront to Churchmen is considered sacrilegious. The CBCP recognized this milieu in its pastoral guideline, where the bishops set in perspective the silence of the victims this way: "When the abuser is from the clergy or religious, the culture tends to remain silent because accusing a religious person imbued culturally with holiness and divine authority can disturb the peace of society. Victims harbor a lurking fear that they would most likely be blamed for challenging the culture's superpowers."<sup>19</sup>

Sexual infractions of Filipino clergymen have been isolated cases at most, unlike in the US, for instance, where sexual abuses of priests in a diocese have been institutional and the bishop merely kept a blind eye, put a lid on the scandal and moved the errant priest from one parish to another.

The fact that there exists an employer-employee relationship between the bishop and the errant priest—unlike in the Philippines where priests are not considered employees by the bishop—makes the US diocese civilly liable for damages as well, retired Archbishop Oscar Cruz explained. "They have salaries, paid vacation leaves, pensions. Here, we only give the priest allowances. We have no formal employer-employee relationship. That is one reason I could think of." Asked why the Philippine setup between a bishop and priest was different from its US counterpart, retired Archbishop Cruz said: "They chose it to be that way. Here, we do it differently."

Cruz said legal jurisprudence in the country also held that the diocese or the bishop could not be sued by the victim. But University of the Philippines lawyer Harry Roque believes that one can actually sue the diocese (or the incumbent bishop) under the concept of command responsibility. "It is possible but no victim has done it yet. That's why it has not been tested."

Cebu-based lawyer Michal Gatchalian, himself a victim of sex abuse by a priest, said "the Civil Code does not extend liability to the superiors of the erring individual as infractions are considered personal in nature."

Philippine child protection laws are also considered weak in going after sex molesters and somehow fail to cover violations committed by clergymen. For instance, the Special Protection of Children Against Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act (RA No. 7610) enacted in 1992 "did not cover sexual abuse of children on church premises or properties," points out a report by the Likhaan, Child Justice League, and Catholics for Free Choice.<sup>20</sup>

While the implementing guidelines of the law requires mandatory reporting on child abuse cases, "reporting has been applied in a limited way only to caregivers, nurses, doctors, and teachers. As such,



fellow priests and bishops or superiors of the offending cleric are not liable for non-reporting under this law. Since the ecclesiastical culture is fairly hierarchical and highly secretive in cases like this, it is difficult to establish personal knowledge and non-reporting.”

One example was a Franciscan priest assigned to a parish in Manila who was accused sometime in 1990 of sexually molesting two of his teenage acolytes. A criminal case of acts of lasciviousness filed against the priest was dismissed on a technicality. The prosecutor said the charges applied only to female children and to male children below 12 years old. A check with the 2010-2011 Catholic Directory, which lists all active priests and their current assignments, showed that the involved priest was still active in his religious congregation as a guest master. (A guest master is one whose duty is to receive and entertain guests in a religious house.)

Then there was the 1998 case of a parish priest in Dagupan City who was accused of raping a 14-year-old girl while her mother supposedly watched. The judge threw out the case on the grounds that the complainant gave not only inconsistent but improbable details in her account. In closing the decision, the judge pointed out that the priest “may have been a flirt, he might have nearly crossed the threshold of perdition, but certainly he was no child molester, much less a rapist.” The Catholic directory showed the priest was still in active service in a La Union parish.

One high-profile case that hogged the headlines in Cebu was that of Father Apolinario Mejorada, who was alleged to have molested three altar boys and another youngster. The victims complained to then-Cebu Archbishop Ricardo Cardinal Vidal, who was Mejorada’s superior. At the time of the alleged abuse, between 1995 and 1998, Mejorada was rector of the Basilica Minore del Sto. Niño.

One of the complainants, Michal Gatchalian, who was a teenager at the time of the abuse, said that the case had barely moved to “first base” 10 years after it was filed.<sup>21</sup> The case was dismissed by the Court of Appeals but Mejorada appealed before the Supreme Court.

Gatchalian, a 31-year-old lawyer, said he was abused by Mejorada in January 1998 when he was 17. The assault was repeated in September 1999. At the age of 21, he mustered the courage to file the complaint in 2003 when the Church investigation into his case appeared futile. He asked for Mejorada’s expulsion. But he was told to sign a blank paper, which supposedly would contain his narration of events. He did so in good faith.

Gatchalian said he never got a copy of the results of the supposed Church investigation by then Ricardo Cardinal Vidal. He underwent two to three therapy sessions “but that was it. I never heard from any Church officials [about] what happened to the probe.”<sup>22</sup>

Gatchalian said he was “bribed” by Mejorada with P80,000 not to pursue the case. This is apart from the P120,000 that Mejorada’s brother, Father Mario Mejorada, offered as settlement. “I am not sure if the money was from the Order of St. Augustine (where Father Apolinario Mejorada belonged) or if it was raised by his family,” Gatchalian said.

In his affidavit, Apolinario Mejorada admitted the act but said he had already sought forgiveness from Gatchalian, the man’s family, and church officials. Despite the confession, the city prosecutor’s office trashed the case because Mejorada had supposedly asked for forgiveness.

His ordeal shaped Gatchalian’s decision to take up law. “It cemented my desire to become a lawyer.” He passed the bar in 2008.

Gatchalian said he met Mejorada in 2008 in a church in Makati City to see the priest who abused him and put a close to this sad and traumatic chapter in his life. The Catholic Directory showed Mejorada was previously with the Nuestra Señora de Gracia Parish in Guadalupe, Makati, as parish treasurer. He became parochial vicar of the Mother of Good Counsel Parish in San Pedro, Laguna. (We sought to get his side but his secretary said Mejorada was not available for any interviews.)

In that 2008 meeting, Mejorada told Gatchalian that he was exiled to a mission in Africa as punishment. The Augustinians, the priest said, took pity on him after he underwent a heart bypass and allowed him to resume his priestly services.

Contrary to initial reports, Gatchalian said that while he may have forgiven Mejorada, he would continue seeking justice. “I want the case to take its legal course.” He said there were other victims of Mejorada’s abuse, but they opted not to pursue the case.

## NEW LAW ON CHURCH SECRECY

Why are these priests still in active service? The CBCP guideline in handling sexual abuses and misconduct provides the answer.<sup>23</sup>

Like closet priest-fathers, the Church wants to save the ministry of closet gays in the priesthood, especially if he is a first-time offender and if the victim is more than 12 years old. The offender is required to undergo rehabilitation or a recovery program. “Future reinstatement to the ministry will depend on his progress, the positive evaluation of his mentors and the recommendation of experts whom the bishop or superior may consult.”<sup>24</sup>

Just like priest-fathers who sire a second child, if the gay cleric has a homosexual relation or activity for the second time, he will be considered a “serial sexual offender” and the bishop or his superior is urged to seriously consider his dismissal from the ministry. If the homosexual activity is not between two consenting adults and the victim is less than 12 years old, appropriate sanctions, including dismissal, will be imposed.

The guideline, however, is just a paper tiger.

A footnote in the guideline states that the provisions “are presented without prejudice to the procedure provided by *Motu Proprio Sacramentorum Sanctitatis Tutela*, 30 April 2001,” which refers to an edict issued by Pope John Paul II in 2001 that mandates bishops worldwide to notify the office of the Vatican-based Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for any allegation of child sex abuse by a priest. The edict requires bishops to seek further instruction from a Vatican delegate for any action taken on the offending priest beyond preliminary investigation.<sup>25</sup>

The Church law says that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith may, at its own discretion, conduct an inquiry itself or guide the bishop on how to proceed with the case. It further states that cases are “subject to pontifical secret,” one of the two highest levels of confidentiality set by the Holy See, the other being absolute confidentiality of sacramental confession.

The women’s group, Likhaan, and the Child Justice League Inc. (CJLI) said that with the edict, the Vatican usurped civil and criminal laws pertaining to child protection and sexual abuse of minors. “It should be noted that the secrecy required in Philippine jurisprudence is to protect the child’s identity from stigmatization and not to protect the identity of the offender who may happen to be a priest or a religious,” the groups said.<sup>26</sup>

But the same report quotes Gaudencio Cardinal Rosales as explaining that the *Motu Proprio Sacramentorum Sanctitatis Tutela* only applies to bishops who have committed sexual transgressions. If the edict is applicable to the priests, this might create a scenario where every case involving a cleric will have to await the go-signal from the Vatican, according to Rosales.<sup>27</sup>

In actuality, the new edict only strengthens the culture of secrecy and confidentiality that has been firmly embedded in the Church. It is a culture of concealment that has been institutionalized, a culture that has allowed the Church to cover-up abuses. Theology professor and former priest Aloysius Cartagenas, in his article for *Asia Horizons*, quoted Dublin Archbishop Diarmuid Martin: “The Church tragically failed

many of its children, it failed through abuse. It failed through covering up abuse.” Martin called it the false culture of clericalism.<sup>28</sup>

The case of Bishop Almario, which has been kept secret all this time, is one prime example.

## FATE OF VICTIMS

It is the stigma of shame that prevents victims of sexual abuse from seeking redress in the courts. This is even recognized by the CBCP, when it states in its now-rejected guidelines that “the silence of victims is partly due to the ‘nonviolent’ experience of many cases of abuse. Most victims do not feel pain or violence during the moment of abuse. It is at a much later time, when one understands more fully the harmful effects, that one begins to talk. When the abuser is from the clergy or religious, the culture tends to remain silent because accusing a religious person imbued culturally with holiness and divine authority can disturb the peace of society. Victims harbor a lurking fear that they would most likely be blamed for challenging the culture’s superpowers.”<sup>29</sup>

This was also the situation faced by the former secretary of resigned Novaliches Bishop Teodoro Bacani who cried sexual harassment. The former secretary sought the help of a nun and women’s groups in seeking redress against Bacani, instead of the court. She however threatened to file a case in court if the Vatican would not act on her complaint.<sup>30</sup> Bacani admitted his lapse in judgment and was forced to resign in November 2003.<sup>31</sup>

In the case of former Malolos Bishop Cirilo Almario, Legaspi, who led the inquiry, said he was not aware if there had been any financial settlement or if there was any restitution for the victims. Legaspi referred us to the Vatican’s guideline in addressing victims of abuse.

A circular issued by Rome’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to serve as guide for Episcopal Conferences in dealing with sexual abuse cases speaks only of “spiritual and psychological assistance” to the victim and the family.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, it suggests that the accused cleric “should always be afforded a just and fit sustenance” while the investigation is ongoing.

The CBCP pastoral guideline passes on to the offender the responsibility of indemnifying the victim by shouldering the victim’s therapy costs. On a case-to-case basis, the diocese may, “out of charity,” financially assist the victim “in the healing process ... if the offender needs assistance.” All expenses incurred by the diocese related to the case are to be reimbursed by the offender.<sup>33</sup>

A Church lawyer explained that institutionalizing restitution for victims might harm the Church since it would open itself to potential blackmail from false accusers. Like in the US, bishops who were in conflict with the law were merely transferred from one parish to another, from one diocese to another, thus abetting in covering up the cleric’s misconduct. This led some dioceses in the US to declare bankruptcy. The lawyer said, “We do not want that to happen here.”

P a r t O n e

C H A P T E R 4

LEADING  
DOUBLE LIVES

**D**URING ONE GATHERING, PAPAL NUNCIO GIUSEPPE PINTO was chatting with a retired archbishop and their conversation somehow veered to children begotten by members of the clergy. The Italian-born Pinto, who was appointed by Pope Benedict XVI as his representative to the Philippines in May 2011,<sup>1</sup> was in a talkative mood.

“We will provide support to children fathered by priests,” Pinto said, without batting an eyelash. The retired archbishop’s eyes widened, amused and shocked at the same time, realizing Pinto’s naïveté. “But Your Excellency, if you do that, you will be responsible for the bankruptcy of the Catholic Church in the Philippines!” the prelate said.

“The Nuncio did not know what he was saying. I did not know if he was making a joke or if he was serious,” the archbishop recalled.<sup>2</sup>

For the former archbishop, the growing number of priests siring children, getting involved in relationships or violating their vows of celibacy was certainly no laughing matter. His remarks about the Church going bankrupt may be an exaggeration, but it certainly has a grain of truth.

Despite their vow of celibacy, or maybe because of it, priests having affairs or siring children is not a new phenomenon in the Philippines. In some dioceses, the problem has become the norm rather than the exception, particularly in Pampanga.

Among the 86 archdioceses, prelatures, and apostolic vicariates in the country, the diocese of San Fernando, Pampanga, stands out: it has the highest number of priests engaged in sexual relationships, according to Church sources. In Pampanga, almost one-third of its more than 100 priests have been found to have illicit relations.

Across the nation, an average of 50 priests are “in conflict situation” at any given time, said retired Archbishop Oscar Cruz, head of a dispensation and dismissal section in the CBCP which investigates and recommends action on priests who go astray. Almost all the cases that Cruz handled involved violations of celibacy.<sup>3</sup>

In Pampanga, somehow, people have become used to it. They could not care less. Why is this so?

Archbishop Emeritus Cruz, who was appointed bishop of San Fernando diocese in 1978,<sup>4</sup> had battled with the situation for 10 years. Priests in sexual relationships were like jueteng, a numbers game, which had become an accepted practice in the province. Cruz found out that taking on this institutional aberration was like going into a losing war.

In 1988, at the age of 54, Cruz resigned as bishop of San Fernando. He was generally disliked by Pampanga priests for being strict. Like in the case of former Bacolod Bishop Camilo Gregorio, who is now the bishop of Batanes, a group of priests orchestrated Cruz’s ouster in Pampanga.

Gregorio was forced to resign by a number of militant priests during the Marcos dictatorship. Gregorio’s political philosophy in dealing with the Marcoses—the bishop wanted to temper the growing political activism of the priests in Bacolod—did not suit them.

While in Pampanga, Cruz, a canon law expert, showed no mercy toward priests having affairs and fathering children. His rigid position on erring priests had no shades of grey. “One violation and you’re out,” was his mantra.<sup>5</sup> Rumors of his priests having affairs were quickly investigated and when evidence was strong, he kicked out the erring clergymen.

This naturally earned him enemies and, somehow, a group of priests managed to bring their complaints to the Vatican. “He quit out of frustration,” a monsignor said. “He wanted to reform the priesthood but he was swimming against the tide.”

Years after he left Pampanga, the same problem persisted and had now taken a life of its own.



## ‘A TICKING TIME BOMB’

The situation in Pampanga is like a ticking time bomb, ready to explode anytime. Archbishop Paciano Aniceto, poles apart from his predecessor in disciplining erring priests, replaced Cruz. While Cruz saw only black and white, Aniceto tempered his brand of justice with mercy and forgiveness. Aniceto’s attitude emboldened priests to violate their vow of celibacy.

*Newsbreak* reported in 2004 that almost one-third of priests there were reportedly having sexual affairs or siring children. At that time, we were provided with a list of 35 fornicating priests out of the more than 100 in the diocese.<sup>6</sup> It was only a matter of time before an aggrieved party would go to court to punish a misbehaving priest.

In October 2011, a layman formally filed a complaint in court against Father Jeffrey Maghirang, a resident priest at the Metropolitan Cathedral of San Fernando, for adultery and unjust vexation. The layman, who asked not be identified to protect the privacy of his only child, accused Maghirang of having an affair with his wife.

The case was potentially embarrassing for the Pampanga diocese since it was the first time that someone formally filed a case against a Church member. All the private details could be revealed in court, exposing the Church in all its faults and frailties.

This was not the first time, however, that Aniceto’s attention was caught by the problem of fornicating priests. In his book, *People, Priests and Pedophiles* published in 1994, philanthropist Earl Wilkinson compiled letters, including letters published in the newspaper *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, detailing the alleged sexual abuse against a choir member committed by one of Aniceto’s priests.

In September 1993, Aniceto received a letter from a certain Christian Evangelista, seeking justice for the abuse suffered by his girlfriend from Father Arnold Rivera. “We do not want to bring this to the press or to take legal action because we care about the Church. I and my girlfriend seek justice, not revenge. Please do not disappoint us, Your Holiness, for disappointment bears [a] drastic move that may affect us all.”<sup>7</sup>

Aniceto reportedly did not reply to Evangelista’s letter, prompting the victim and her boyfriend to personally seek an audience with the archbishop. When they asked that the offending priest be expelled, Aniceto reportedly said: “We cannot do that. He is also human.”<sup>8</sup>

In an October 2, 1993, letter to the editor published by the *Inquirer*, a certain Maria Luiza Robles narrated her “bitter and humiliating experience” from a priest and how Aniceto acted on her complaint. “But he never showed concern. I did expect him to discharge that priest, but he did the opposite. He said priests are also human who fall into temptation. And he claimed that women who suffer [a] fate such as mine were the ones who seduced priests.”

“Like other rape victims, I’m dying for justice to restore my peace of mind. But I’m all alone. My oppressor is protected by the Church. The only hope is the belief that there are real Christians out there who will extend legal assistance to me.”<sup>9</sup>

Following the letter's publication, Wilkinson took an interest and sought to find the letter's sender, who had also given her address. They found Robles (not her real name, Wilkinson would later find out), and Wilkinson asked someone else to talk to the victim. After a two-hour meeting, Robles supposedly agreed to travel to Manila and talk to lawyers about possibly filing charges. But Robles never resurfaced.

In a follow-up report in the *Inquirer*, Aniceto supposedly formed a 12-member board to probe the alleged complaint. The report also claimed that a "ranking Church dignitary offered P50,000 to dissuade them from filing a case in court."<sup>10</sup>

On December 21, 1993, Wilkinson sent a letter to Aniceto asking for an update on the board's inquiry as well as information on the alleged bribe-giver. Wilkinson said that "until press time [of] 1994, no reply was received, not even a courtesy telephone call. Another case closed?"

## MORE OF THE SAME

Almost 20 years after this case, things have remained the same, if not worse. Some blamed Aniceto's forgiving attitude for encouraging more of his priests to commit sins of the flesh.

In 2002, a well-loved priest was inadvertently revealed as having a family of his own during an interview by a TV magazine show. Still in active duty at that time, Father Crispin Cadiang admitted he had fathered two children.

In an interview in 2004, Cadiang said the TV interview was taped without his permission. Although his face was blurred to hide his identity, Pampanga parishioners were able to identify him. What followed was a living nightmare.

Cadiang said Aniceto asked him to go on sabbatical while his superior contemplated his future. Still, it took time for Aniceto to act on his case. At the time of the interview, Aniceto appeared reluctant to let go of Cadiang. He argued that while everyone appeared to know about Cadiang's extra-curricular activities, no complaint had been filed against him. "I was the last one to know," Aniceto said.<sup>11</sup>

Aniceto sought to downplay the gravity of the situation. He said that while he had cases of erring priests, the figure was "not that high. There is a problem but the diocese is trying to address it." He said three priests had sought voluntary dispensation—a process where the concerned priest seeks to be freed from his current status and become a layman. He said the Church only acted if there was a complaint.

The initiative to leave the priesthood came from Cadiang himself. He sent two letters to Aniceto asking to be dispensed from his priestly status. In July 2003, he sent the first letter, which was not acted upon. Months later, in September, he sent a second letter stating his irrevocable resignation. Cadiang told us then that Aniceto had given his blessing. But Cadiang's case was only placed in the freezer.

In 2010, Cadiang was interviewed in connection with his decision to run for political office and reiterated that he had "resigned" from the priesthood. But he admitted that he had not been granted formal dispensation, which meant he essentially remained a priest.<sup>12</sup>

Up to now, Cadiang is still awaiting his dispensation from the Vatican. Meanwhile, he had stopped his clerical ministry but is still involved in Church activities.<sup>13</sup>

## ABUSING THE PRIVILEGE

If Church authorities apparently viewed the situation as normal, what more could be expected from parishioners? Kapampangans are known for their deep religiosity, loving and spoiling their priests to a fault. Yearly, its Mother of Good Counsel seminary in San Fernando City churns out a good number of priests, whose studies were funded by rich parishioners. Notable alumni of the seminary include the likes of Aniceto, resigned Bishop Crisostomo Yalung, and current Pampanga auxiliary Bishop Pablo David.

The views of lay leaders Rollie David and his wife, Maritz, typify the Kapampangans' attitude toward their priests. Fornicating priests are "taken for granted" even if, or maybe because "we look up to our religious leaders." Ironically, the Davids are members and facilitators of Marriage Encounter and Family Apostolate, a lay group in Pampanga.

"I have had my mistakes. Who does not?"

One prime example is Father Eddie Tongol Panlilio, who won one term as Pampanga governor in 2007, on a platform of honesty, integrity, and governance. Branding himself as a messiah for the people of Pampanga, Panlilio trumped the moneyed Lilia Pineda, whose machinery was allegedly financed by *jueteng* money, and then-Governor Mark Lapid.

Rumors of having affairs with women and siring a child or children dogged Panlilio even before he threw his hat into the political ring. This was one particular concern that some pastors of the Protestant group Jesus Is Lord Movement (JIL) asked Panlilio when they invited him to a meeting before the 2007 elections. The JIL pastors were trying to assess whether to support Panlilio's gubernatorial bid.

In that meeting, where we were present, one pastor categorically asked Panlilio about the rumors. The aspiring governor cryptically replied: "I have had my mistakes. Who does not?" He was very clear, however, that he had not sired any children.<sup>14</sup>

The outpouring of support that Panlilio got from the public, volunteers, as well as some Pampanga Church hierarchy and clergy effectively downplayed questions about his own fidelity to his priestly vocation. The Commission on Elections, however, later stripped Panlilio of his position after it sustained the electoral protest filed by Pineda which showed she actually won by 2,011 votes over Panlilio. The Supreme Court junked Panlilio's appeal for being moot and academic since the elective term for those elected in 2007 had already expired.<sup>15</sup>

## VIRAL DISEASE

There are others who disdain the double lives led by their priests, but they are the minority. And they remain silent. “Of course, you cannot blame these people. They say, how can you expect that priest to speak on fidelity and honesty when you cannot expect that from the priest himself?” Maritz said.

But generally, sexual infractions of Pampanga priests are taken kindly by Pampanga parishioners. Cadiang, before he “resigned,” said he was “surprised when people hearing mass increased in my parish,” even after his case was the talk of the town. He interpreted it as a show of their continuing support. “The people’s show of support was very encouraging.”

Was the Kapampangans’ forgiving attitude the reason behind Aniceto’s lax attitude as well? Regardless, critics said he perpetuated a problem by abusing the reverence that Pampanga Catholics reserved for their priests. One Church official described the situation as such: “It shows that the people have become desensitized to the real situation. It also reveals a flawed appreciation of morality and the people who are supposed to preach and uphold it.”

“They tolerate each other. How can you squeal on your neighbor when you are as guilty?”

For retired Archbishop Cruz, such a forgiving attitude—both by Aniceto and the parishioners—sent a wrong signal to Pampanga priests. “‘If others got away with it, so too can I,’ would be the thinking of these erring priests,” Cruz said.

This explained why he was strict and rigid with priests who did not toe the line. “Either you serve God as a priest or be a layman. It cannot be both. I have respect for those who ask for dispensation from the priesthood than those who stay in the priesthood and enjoy the benefits of a layman.”

In a culture where secrecy is the norm, priests who are able to keep their record clean would rather keep mum about the indiscretions of their brethren. This hands-off culture, prevalent in Pampanga, only prodded other priests to violate their celibacy vow. It was like a virus that surreptitiously infected others.

“They tolerate each other. How can you squeal on your neighbor when you are as guilty?” Cruz said, explaining the situation among Pampanga priests.

In our interview with Aniceto in 2011, he said five priests had sought dispensation for maintaining relationships or fathering children. This did not include those who maintained secret affairs, but who opted to remain priests.

## BROKEN FAMILY

One of the major Church tenets is the inviolability of marriage. But what if the very reason why a family breaks up is because of a priest?

Maghirang's case made the news after the husband went to court to file charges of adultery. For a diocese with an inherent problem with its priests, it was the first time that a man of the cloth was brought to court for allegedly having an affair with a married woman. The way Aniceto handled his case shows how the Church generally tackles issues concerning its members.

In our interview with the complainant, he said Maghirang was a family friend of his wife. As most Kapampangan families are with priests, Maghirang was treated like one of the family. "He used to sleep over in my wife's maternal home. I saw nothing wrong with that. I was confident there was nothing going on since he is a priest."

He heard rumors about his wife and the priest having a special relationship but ignored it. Somehow, however, doubts crept in.

He found out about the affair between Maghirang and his wife of two years in April 2011 when he accessed the family's computer. There, he was able to retrieve e-mail exchanges of a romantic nature between the two alleged lovers. He also read a text exchange from the priest addressing his wife: "*Sige, Babes, sleep na tayo. Gagawa pa ako ng homily.* [I have to go, Babes, let's go to sleep. I still have to prepare my homily.]"

The cuckold, who was an acolyte when he was a child, said he complained to Aniceto and sought the priest's dismissal. The archbishop assured him that he would take action.<sup>16</sup>

But the complainant found out that Maghirang continued to be active with his priestly duties, even saying Mass. In July 2011, the husband inquired with Pampanga auxiliary Bishop Pablo David about Maghirang's status. David told him that Maghirang had denied the charges.

Still, David assured him that the Church "will take action." When the complainant said he would take action in court if the Church would not, David sent him a text message: "Ambo David here. Just to assure you that action is being taken by authorities over your complaint. We are currently looking for a replacement [for Maghirang]."

The complainant said he also went to the CBCP to complain, but was told that he should approach Aniceto, being Maghirang's superior. Aniceto, in our interview, said Maghirang had been suspended while undergoing discernment.<sup>17</sup> At this stage, the priest has to reflect on whether to give up his vocation or have a secular life. There is no deadline for the period of discernment.

As expected, Aniceto's move fell short of the complainant's expectations. When it was clear to him that Maghirang was most likely to keep his post, the complainant decided to take the priest to court.

On October 12, 2011, adultery charges, which carry a penalty of eight to 12 years in prison, were lodged against Maghirang. The San Fernando diocese provided a lawyer to defend him.

In February 2012, Angeles City prosecutor Oliver Garcia dismissed the adultery complaint for lack of evidence.<sup>18</sup> The complainant, sensing the futility of going after Maghirang, did not file a motion for reconsideration.

A lay leader, whose lifelong vocation was to expose erring priests, offered to help the complainant by conducting a discreet inquiry into Maghirang's psychological profile and personality. The lay leader visited Maghirang one time in a retreat house and concluded that the priest was probably culpable for violating his priestly oath.

But to the complainant, it did not matter anymore. When we visited him a few months after his case was junked, he said he was in the process of moving on. This meant separating from his wife, having custody of their child and vowing to keep track of Maghirang's movements.

P a r t T w o

C H A P T E R 5

'THE SECOND  
GREATEST SCANDAL  
IN THE  
CHURCH'



IN JANUARY 1995, THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE Philippines added another feather to its cap following the second successful visit of Pope John Paul II. For a full year, preparations were in full swing for the Holy Father's visit to the country, with both the Church and the Ramos government pulling out all the stops for the pastoral extravaganza.

For the event, Church and government organizers set up a press center at the Philippine International Convention Center, where press conferences were also held. On the first day of the visit, the ebullient Manila Cardinal Jaime Sin presided over a press conference, with a large number of reporters as his captive audience.

The air was filled with the goodwill and euphoria of a "living saint" making his appearance. Everyone was asking safe, if not politically correct, questions. But one intrepid reporter chose to break from the pack.

The veteran journalist Antonio Lopez, who was then working for a foreign publication, pointedly asked Sin: "How rich is the Catholic Church?"

Reporters who were present were more aghast than amused, but waited for Sin to rebut what seemed like a blasphemous question.

A bishop or a Church official made of lesser stuff would have been rattled. But not Sin. Without skipping a beat, Sin countered: "Have you made your contributions to the Church?" To which Lopez replied, "No." Sin then told him, "Then you have no right to ask that question." Lopez, stunned, was silenced.

Two years later, the Monte de Piedad fiasco unfolded and Sin was repeating the same answer. Raising questions about Church finances, to some, could be tantamount to blasphemy. There are those who believe that questioning the Church on money matters is off-limits.

Almost like blind faith, Catholic believers consider questioning the Church's conduct of its financial affairs taboo. Despite the reforms sought under the Second Plenary Council, which called for greater lay participation in Church and sociopolitical affairs, the Church's inner workings were wrapped in a veil of secrecy. Members of the laity who questioned the Church's finances were considered rabble-rousing outsiders—almost heretical, even.

The chapters in Part Two of this book show, through three cases, how the Church conducts itself on financial matters: the bankruptcy of Monte de Piedad, which was previously owned by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Manila; the unaccounted multimillion-peso donations to the Church-owned Radio Veritas; and the alleged diversion of donations for disaster victims by the diocese of Parañaque. They show a Church that is far from transparent, one that is beyond the scrutiny of well-meaning lay leaders. It shows that financial accountability is the Church's Achilles heel.



*Parañaque Bishop Jess Mercado*

As men of God, Church officials and others who make up the hierarchy are generally seen as above suspicion by the faithful. But money is not called “the root of all evil” for nothing.

After the sexual scandal that plagued the Catholic Church in the past two or three decades, observers say the Church should brace itself for a second wave of controversy that could further shake its wobbly foundation. Michael W. Ryan, a retired federal law enforcement official whose expertise is financial audits and security investigations, pointed out that financial travesty could be “the second biggest scandal in the Church.” Ryan wrote the book *Nonfeasance*, which tackled the US Catholic hierarchy’s failure to protect the Church’s primary source of income—Sunday collections.

In his article “Priest Stealing from Sunday Collections,” Ryan<sup>1</sup> cited cases of embezzlement of Church coffers by Catholic priests, particularly the Sunday collections, and the Church’s ineffective audits, which allowed such malfeasance to be committed. Ryan even suggested that that “there is [a] clear and shocking connection between the hierarchy’s laissez-faire attitude toward revenue collection and the ability of predator-priests to fund their deviant activities.”

One case he cited was that of the late Reverend Walter Benz, who was parish priest of the St. Mary Assumption in Hampton, Pennsylvania, and previously, of the Our Lady of the Most Blessed Sacrament in Harrison.

Ryan said Benz, “confessed to stealing an average of \$50,000 per year over a 26-year period. Benz admitted the money was used to fund expensive items such as cars, guns, antiques, a Florida condominium and gambling trips to Atlantic City in the company of his secretary, with whom he had lived with for a number of years.” Reports said Benz was accused of stealing \$1.3 million sourced from Sunday collection baskets, but died of leukemia before he was arraigned.<sup>2</sup>

In the Philippines, considering the cloak of secrecy that still pervades the Church, reports of priests embezzling Church funds have been few and far between—but this does not mean it is not happening. Transparency in its balance sheet has not been among the local Church’s strongest suits.

And the public agrees. A 2003 survey commissioned by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines showed that mismanagement and corruption within the Church were cited by the respondents

as among “the perceived problem[s] of the Church.”<sup>3</sup>

## NO DUTY TO REPORT

Financial corruption in the Church, to be sure, is as old as the New Testament. One of Christ's original 12 disciples, Judas Iscariot, according to the approved Gospels of the Catholic Church, was so filled with desire for 30 pieces of silver that he betrayed the Savior. In remorse, Judas hanged himself, but such self-punishment is unlikely to happen among the present Church hierarchy.

The general attitude of bishops and priests toward efforts to pry into Church finances was best illustrated by Parañaque Bishop Jesse Mercado, who was accused of mismanaging millions of pesos of donations for calamity victims. The prelate rebuffed moves by some priests and lay people to open the diocese's books for an independent audit.

In a press conference arranged by his good friend, retired Archbishop Oscar Cruz, Mercado engaged this journalist in a heated discussion over public disclosure of the diocese's financial status. Below is the transcript of the exchange:<sup>4</sup>

- RUFO: *So when I will request for all the receipts of the donations and the disbursements, you will give these to me?*
- MERCADO: *That depends. What for? Why are you asking for that?*
- RUFO: *You're challenging the story [that I had written], that it's not true. So if I will ask for all the donations received for all the calamity victims and all the disbursements, will you be able to give these to me?*
- MERCADO: *I think we have the right to ask also. Why?*
- RUFO: *For publication.*
- MERCADO: *What for?*
- RUFO: *For transparency.*
- MERCADO: *What for? What for? What for?*
- RUFO: *For transparency.*
- MERCADO: *Are we required to present these to you? Why are we required to present these to you?*
- RUFO: *Are you telling me that you won't give these to me?*
- MERCADO: *No, I'm not telling you that. But why are you asking for it?*
- RUFO: *For transparency, Bishop.*
- MERCADO: *What do you mean by transparency? Do we need to be transparent to you?*
- RUFO: *That's the issue within your diocese—financial transparency.*
- MERCADO: *My answer is, we can be transparent. We have people and ...*
- RUFO: *Can you just make a categorical statement that you will give the documents to me?*
- MERCADO: *It depends. I have the right to ask, why do you want it?*

Such an obstinate attitude to keep outsiders from inquiring about money matters also extended to the Parañaque lay groups that demanded accountability. These lay groups organized a forum to call for

transparency and accountability in the diocese's finances, but Mercado shut the door by issuing a communiqué that the forum was not sanctioned by him.

Reacting to the story about the restiveness in the Parañaque diocese, Jess Lorenzo, the program director of the Kaya Natin! Movement for Good Governance and Ethical Leadership, observed that “even after 500 years [following the Reformation that split the Church in Europe], there has not been any clear effort from the Church to develop accountability mechanisms.”<sup>5</sup>

“Time and time again, the Church has always been hounded by accountability problems but there has never been a clear and unified effort to establish a system to facilitate transparency and accountability in order to systematically restore trust. Most of the problems are handled on a case-by-case basis and many are left to the bishop[s] to initiate their own investigation. Most are not trained and none are compelled to set up an office to act as ombudsman. Many cases are left unresolved. Few realize that adopting reasonable public accountability principles would actually strengthen the Diocese and save the leadership grief when problems occur,” Lorenzo said.

It is not supposed to be this way. Church law provides checks and balances when it comes to finances.

## THE FINANCE COUNCIL

The right of the Church to acquire goods and material wealth is stated in Canon 1254, paragraph 1: it is “the inherent right of the Catholic Church, independently of the secular State, to acquire, retain, administer, and alienate temporal goods in the furtherance of her proper objectives.”<sup>6</sup>

The objective is three-fold: 1) the sustained regulation of divine worship; 2) the funding of the apostolates and works of charity; and 3) the adequate support of the clergy and other lay ministers.<sup>7</sup> (The Canon Law is the Universal Church Law, which governs the Catholic Church worldwide.)

In the administration of the Church’s finances, the Code of the Canon Law mandates the creation of a finance committee presided by the bishop, if it is a diocese, or the parish priest, if it is on the parish level. In the diocesan level, “it is to be composed of at least three of the faithful, experts in financial and civil law, of outstanding integrity and appointed by the bishop.”<sup>8</sup>

Retired Archbishop Oscar Cruz, one of the few Canon law experts in the country, says that by its very nature, “the finance council is a composite of duly trusted and chosen members from the Christian faithful, known for their fidelity to the Church, their competence in the management of temporal goods as such, and their willingness to volunteer their services... . The members are usually odd in number and given a term of service.”<sup>9</sup>

Cruz said the basic objective of the finance council was “to protect, preserve and promote the interests of public juridical persons in the Church that are owners of ecclesiastical goods.” The assumption is that “those officially designated by law as administrators do not necessarily have the expertise or competence in financial management and therefore need assistance for the due exercise of their office.”<sup>10</sup>

In the parish level, the membership of the council and the terms of office are not prescribed by Canon Law, although it follows the same principle as in the diocesan level. Cruz maintains that the Canon Law is clear that the establishment of the finance council is not an option but an expressed mandate. “A finance council is a must for every juridical person to have and to act through.”<sup>11</sup>

### INUTILE

In a way, the finance council acts as a check and balance to the bishop or the parish priest. But with the power that the bishop or the priest wields, the finance council is reduced to a mere recommendatory body in most cases, rendering it almost inutile.

The case of Reverend Bayani Valenzuela of the St. Andrew’s Parish in Parañaque, is one glaring example.

For years, Valenzuela plundered the parish and parochial school’s coffers under the noses of the finance council members, including misappropriating P14 million in school funds to an investment that later failed.

Tapping family members and relatives for parish work, Valenzuela siphoned money from Sunday collections, commingled parish and school funds, and used these to pamper himself with luxuries such as

five-star hotel gym fees and expensive meals. For some reason, the parish finance council was clueless about the repeated plunder. Parañaque Bishop Jesse Mercado was also kept in the dark.

“One time, we were asked by the bishop why the Sunday collections appeared to be decreasing. It is not that the parishioners were no longer giving as much. It is the fact that some priests are partaking of the Church funds.”

It was only when activist priest Monsignor Manuel Gabriel took over at St. Andrew’s that the anomaly was uncovered. Still, Mercado failed to punish Valenzuela; he let him off the hook. This sent the wrong signal to the other priests under Mercado’s ward.

In our interviews with several priests of the diocese, they revealed that some Parañaque clergy could be dipping their hands in the cookie jar, as shown by their lavish lifestyle. “One time, we were asked by the bishop why the Sunday collections appeared to be decreasing. It is not that the parishioners were no longer giving as much. It is the fact that some priests are partaking of the Church funds,” one of the priests said.<sup>12</sup>

There were also cases when members of the finance council were effectively bypassed by high-ranking Church officials who sat close to the throne. This happened when those appointed to handle Church funds embezzled the money themselves. The abuse was compounded by the presence of a too-trusting archbishop or bishop, as in the case of the Archdiocese of Manila under the late Jaime Cardinal Sin.

## CHURCH MAFIA

Once considered the second-richest Catholic diocese in the world, the Archdiocese of Manila (RCAM) was almost bankrupt when Gaudencio Cardinal Rosales formally took over, according to one monsignor who was privy to the matter.

The archdiocese's financial empire was built by Rufino Cardinal Santos, who was considered a financial genius by Church insiders and observers. "He was a financial wizard. He knew how to handle Church funds," said Monsignor Gabriel.<sup>13</sup> David Joel Steinberg, in his book *The Philippines, A Singular And A Plural Place*, described Santos this way: "A staunchly conservative prelate, [Santos] joined fellow bishops in Chile and Nicaragua in accepting the world as it was, with all its socioeconomic dichotomies. He knew more about interest rates in Germany than about hunger in Bohol."

Gabriel recalled that Santos, anticipating that the issue of land distribution would affect Church-owned lands, disposed of huge tracts of land in Pasig and Rizal provinces before the land reform agenda of President Ferdinand Marcos went into full swing.<sup>14</sup>

"The Archdiocese of Manila, the biggest and the richest in the country, started to shift its properties from land to banking and other businesses under the reign of Rufino Cardinal Santos in the 1960s," said Aurea Miclat-Teves, as she traced the history of land reform in the country. Miclat-Teves is an advocate of land reform and indigenous people's rights.<sup>15</sup>

Under Sin, however, the RCAM lost its prime jewel, the Monte de Piedad, which was the first savings bank in the country, and other Church-operated businesses were going in the red.

Behind the mismanagement were a group of Sin's aides and advisers, who took advantage of the cardinal's trust and confidence. One of them was Monsignor Domingo Cirilos, who sat in the board of some of the Church's corporations and was once a treasurer and moderator curiae of RCAM. (A moderator curiae is to the Church as a chief executive officer or chief operating officer is to a company.) Cirilos played a crucial role in the collapse of Monte de Piedad, as he was the one who introduced the conduit that facilitated the loans to tricycle drivers and teachers that precipitated Monte's bankruptcy.

One lawyer, who has been serving as counsel for many religious groups and dioceses, noted that Cirilos was behind the sale of RCAM's prime land assets, entering into deals that were disadvantageous to the Church. One of these disadvantageous deals even dragged in the Holy See.

This involved the 10,115-square-meter asset along Coastal Road in Tambo, Parañaque, which was sold at almost half its actual price to a second buyer—a move that even a Regional Trial Court observed was an obvious attempt by the Church to evade tax payment. It was also a case that almost prompted Pope John Paul II to cancel his visit to the Philippines in 1995.

The property was originally intended as the new site of the Apostolic Nunciature, which owned 6,000 square meters, and the rest by the RCAM. In 1988, the Nunciature changed its mind and asked the RCAM Philippine Realty Corp. (PRC) to find a buyer.

The original buyer, Starbright Sales Enterprises, sought to purchase the property at P1,240 per square



meter for a total price of P12.592 million. They closed the transaction with a P100,000 down payment by Starbright and an agreement that the RCAM would clear the property of informal settlers.<sup>16</sup>

However, after a few months, Cirilos, who was RCAM treasurer and PRC president then, informed Starbright that it had trouble removing the illegal settlers and asked Starbright to undertake the clearing operations. Starbright agreed, on the condition that the purchase price be lowered to P1,150 per square meter. Cirilos rejected the counter-offer, saying other interested buyers were willing to shell out P1,400 per square meter.

It was then that things got more interesting.

In March 1989, Cirilos sold the lot to a new buyer, Tropicana Properties, at a much lower price of P760.68 per square meter, or a total of P7.724 million. Tropicana, in turn, sold the property to Standard Realty Corp. for P10 million.

In effect, Cirilos agreed to sell the RCAM and Nunciature property for a lesser amount, resulting in a loss of income of around P4.468 million, while allowing the buyer a windfall of P2.76 million for selling it to another buyer.

Expectedly, Starbright brought the case to the RTC and included the Holy See among the defendants. In an effort to extricate himself from the mess, Cirilos said he merely acted as an agent of the Pope to sell the lot. Cirilos also claimed that the archdiocesan finance council gave the go-signal for the sale, thereby imputing that Sin, who chaired the council, was also behind it.

Finding itself in such an embarrassing situation, the Holy See hired a different lawyer to defend the Papal office and have the case dismissed. The court issued its ruling favorable to the Holy See two months before the Pope arrived in the Philippines.

In its ruling on the main case, RTC Judge Raul de Leon ruled that Cirilos, PRC, and Tropicana were guilty of negotiating in bad faith. The judge also had some harsh words for Cirilos. It said that Cirilos “employed trickery and deceit not only to the plaintiff but to the government as well” by undervaluing the price of the lot in an apparent effort to evade paying the right taxes.

“This very obvious misrepresentation and gross undervaluation of the properties even caused the government its much needed revenue in terms of not paying the right taxes by the parties in the sale. The Court wonders whether the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Manila and the Holy See were likewise shortchanged in these transactions, if indeed the properties were sold for such an incredible amount. Or did they agree to this illegal and immoral agreement?”<sup>17</sup>

In a January 18, 2012 ruling, the Supreme Court sustained the decision of the Court of Appeals dismissing the case filed by Starbright against the defendants. The SC’s Third Division found that Starbright has no case since the purchase contract had not been perfected. The ruling, however, had one factual error. In the narration of facts, it said that Starbright, through Ramon Licup, “accepted the responsibility for removing the illegal settlers” when it was Cirilos who committed to removing them.<sup>18</sup>

The ruling was penned by Justice Roberto Abad, former dean of the Faculty of Civil Law at the University of Santo Tomas. A published profile said Abad also offered free legal aid training for the lay and religious catechists for the RCAM.<sup>19</sup>

## KID-GLOVE TREATMENT

Despite the mess over the property, Sin retained Cirilos as treasurer, which surprised not just a few priests and Church insiders. How could Sin keep him on board and still enjoy his trust and confidence? “For a CEO, he was a bad one,” commented one monsignor. “He has this weakness of appointing the wrong people.”

It was not until the Monte de Piedad scandal that Cirilos was forced out from the RCAM office. But Sin made sure his favorite former treasurer maintained a prominent position. He appointed him parish priest of Paco, one of the richer parishes under RCAM, replacing Bishop Teodoro Bacani, who was later named bishop of Novaliches. That also put Cirilos in charge of the Paco Parochial School, reputedly “the world’s biggest parochial school in terms of population.”<sup>20</sup>

Another prelate who was supposedly a member of the mafia in the RCAM was retired Bishop Teodoro Buhain, who managed, among others, Radio Veritas. Like Cirilos, he was part of the board when Monte de Piedad undertook the costly loans to tricycle drivers that ultimately caused the bank to collapse. He also managed Radio Veritas, where millions of pesos in donations remained unaccounted for.

After the Monte de Piedad scandal, Buhain was eased out from his perch but was assigned nonetheless to another prime assignment: the Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene, more popularly known as the Quiapo parish. But just before he bowed out from the Church, allegations swirled that he fathered a child by a certain Radio Veritas employee.

To fix the mess created by his own people, Sin appointed his auxiliary bishop, Crisostomo Yalung, who was then a rising star in Sin’s firmament. But Yalung would later fall prey to the trappings of power and succumb to sexual temptation.

Appointed as auxiliary bishop of Manila in 1994, Yalung supervised the revenue-rich ecclesiastical district of Makati. He was the parish priest of the National Shrine of the Sacred Heart in the affluent and gated San Antonio Village in Makati, one of the richest parishes under RCAM.

As parish priest there, Yalung was lavished with gifts from rich parishioners, and generous donations poured into his parish. They never bothered to ask Yalung where their gifts and donations went—until rumors spread that he was having an affair with a woman whom he introduced as his niece.

Apparently, the donations from some rich parishioners, especially those that were given to Yalung personally, were never turned over to the parish for proper accounting. It was only after we broke the story on his affair and his having sired a child that suspicions and complaints surfaced that Yalung kept part of the donations for his personal use.

When he was appointed as bishop of Antipolo, Yalung became more brazen in fleecing money donated to the Church. Mass offerings were delivered to his live-in partner and there was reason to believe that he kept some of the money for the financial security of his “family.” By the time he left the diocese and was sent to the United States following the scandal, he had stashed P5 million in a bank, to be held in trust until his love child turned 18.

Of the three, only Yalung was stripped of his position and job, mainly because of the pressure from the Vatican. Buhain and Cirilos remained under the good graces of Cardinal Sin.

A Church lawyer wondered why Sin failed to punish Buhain and Cirilos considering the two wrought more damage on the Church, financially speaking. While Cirilos and Buhain were both charged and penalized by the Central Bank for the Monte de Piedad collapse, they remained under the protective mantle and protection of Sin.

“In failing to punish the two and even rewarding them with rich parishes to handle, the cardinal had effectively cleared them of any mishandling and mismanagement of Church funds, as if nothing had happened, as if the Church was not victimized. It’s one of Sin’s contradictions. He was quick to accuse others of their sins but he would turn a blind eye when it involved his own men. He was part of the problem,” the Church lawyer observed.<sup>21</sup>

In a way, Sin’s approach was consistent with how the Church handled erring priests who violated their vow of chastity and continence as well as those who were in conflict with the law: by transferring them from one post to another. It was as if moving them from one position or parish to another would erase the problem.

## ENTER ROSALES

In 2003, at the age of 75, Sin reached the compulsory retirement for bishops, archbishops, and cardinals. (Seventy is the retirement age for priests.) The Vatican announced his retirement only 15 days after his 75th birthday on August 31.

“He was quick to accuse others of their sins but he would turn a blind eye when it involved his own men. He was part of the problem.”

Although there had been many instances when Rome allowed a retiring bishop or archbishop to stay for a few more years in office, the Vatican’s quick acceptance of Sin’s resignation was hardly a shocker. At that time, Sin’s health was already deteriorating, his body burdened by dialysis because of his kidney problem. “The general feeling was Rome would accept [Sin’s resignation] because he had not been well,” Father James Reuter, director of the Catholic Church’s National Office for Mass Media, said two months before Sin reached 75.<sup>22</sup>

Two years earlier, Sin reprised his role as kingmaker and power broker, this time anointing Vice President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo as successor to President Joseph Estrada, whose term was abbreviated by a “people power” revolt in 2001. Sin protested the supposed corruption and abuse of power of President Estrada, saying he had lost the moral ascendancy to lead the country.

Sin’s moral posturing, however, smacked of hypocrisy. While he was quick to criticize corruption in the government, he failed to cleanse his own archdiocese of prelates who siphoned money from Church coffers. That job fell to his replacement, Gaudencio Cardinal Rosales.

Rosales was reluctant to accept the post, content with being archbishop of Lipa where he successfully launched the *Pondo ng Pinoy*, a community foundation which supported programs for the poor through funds generated from the 25-centavo coins donated by the faithful.

Installed as archbishop of Manila at the age of 71, Rosales technically had only four more years as the patriarch of Manila before reaching the age of retirement. But he was retired by the Vatican at the age of 79. The Vatican knew he had a lot of mending to do, fixing the RCAM’s finances.

Rosales, in an interview, confirmed that the first order of the day when he assumed office was to find out how much money was left to the RCAM and to make an inventory of all businesses of the Church.

Rosales said he was aware that there were some Church businesses that were in the red because of mismanagement. He refused to elaborate, but said that by the time he left the RCAM, “we were able to introduce some changes.”<sup>23</sup>

One of the changes was a decision “to make sure that all income-generating properties that earn money pay taxes.” He was referring to Church properties and businesses that were not paying taxes based on the wrong assumption that the Church was tax-exempt.

In October 2004, *Newsbreak* reported that RCAM had evaded paying taxes for some of its income-earning businesses and the real estate properties it had been leasing for commercial purposes. This included a hotel located inside the Pope Pius XII Catholic Center and properties in Ermita.<sup>24</sup>

While the Constitution grants tax exemption to charitable institutions, churches, mosques, and other similar establishments, such exemption is only allowed when the properties are exclusively used for religious, charitable, and educational purposes.<sup>25</sup>

Supreme Court rulings show that when the properties have been converted to commercial areas or when income has been derived from commercial and not for religious purposes, such should be properly taxed. (One such related recent case was the Commissioner of Internal Revenue versus the Young Men's Christian Association of the Philippines, G.R. No. 124043 October 14, 1998.)<sup>26</sup>

A Church lawyer explained that the RCAM had been religiously observing such tax applications, but this changed when Cardinal Sin formed a new archdiocesan finance board. The new board, which included Buhain and, at the time, the young upstart Cirilos, decided that they were above taxation laws.

Rosales said that on top of his administrative concerns, fixing the RCAM's finances and nursing it back to health preoccupied his time. But before he retired, he did something that not even his predecessor would dare think of. Acting on the orders of the Vatican, Rosales removed Cirilos as Paco parish priest and prematurely retired him from the priesthood.

With this act, the makeover of RCAM was complete.

P a r t T w o

C H A P T E R 6

A BISHOP, A RADIO  
STATION, AND THE  
MYSTERY OF THE  
MULTIMILLION-PESO  
DONATIONS

THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AND, AS IN PREVIOUS ones, Jaime Cardinal Sin, the patriarch of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Manila (RCAM), sat at the head of a long table. It was January 1987 and the board of directors of the archdiocese met for the first time that year.

Sin, as the sole administrator of the properties and businesses of the RCAM, presided over the meeting. They were to discuss some financial matters and, of course, the forthcoming anniversary of the EDSA 1 “people power” revolution, where Sin played a pivotal role.

After being apprised of the status of the RCAM businesses and properties, Sin was in high spirits. Clearly, he was satisfied with the financial reports. But he was more excited with the preparations for the EDSA 1 anniversary.

But one board member had something on his mind. He knew that one important item was never raised in the board meeting and the cardinal appeared to have forgotten about it. He waited for a board member to raise it during the meeting, but it never cropped up.

There had been talks within RCAM about huge donations received by the archdiocese for the repair and restoration of Radio Veritas, the Church-run radio station which had been instrumental in the downfall of dictator President Marcos in February 1986.

As Marcos’s world turned upside down in the heady days leading to the “people power” revolution, forces allied with him toppled the Radio Veritas transmitter in Malolos, Bulacan, and shut down the station on February 23, 1986. The Catholic Church-owned radio station was a prime target. It had been broadcasting events and developments of the “people power” uprising and it was through this radio station that Sin rallied the people to protect the anti-Marcos forces holed up in Camp Crame and Camp Aguinaldo. “I would be happy if you can show them solidarity and support,” Sin’s voice reverberated over Radio Veritas.<sup>1</sup>

The board member waited for the right time. He knew that timing was everything in dealing with the cardinal. He knew that Sin, who had a healthy appetite, would want to rush things, especially if lunch was about to be served. Finally, the meeting proceeded to discuss “other matters.” It was the moment he had been waiting for.

“Are we through? Can we have lunch already?” Sin said, looking forward to his favorite soup, a shark fin and abalone delicacy called “Buddha jumped over the fence.” That was the board member’s cue.

“Cardinal, you have been instrumental in helping trigger the downfall of President Marcos. People loved you for that and your popularity rating and moral ascendancy have risen to greater heights. They believed and trusted you and they were more than willing to answer your call for any help,” the board member said, trying to massage the cardinal’s ego.

“Proof of that was the astounding support that people gave to Radio Veritas when you asked them for donations to help repair the transmitter destroyed in Malolos, Bulacan. Maybe, since we are celebrating EDSA 1, it would be the right time to express our gratitude,” the board director said.

“Wonderful, wonderful, that’s a good idea. I like that,” Sin replied promptly. “And how do you propose to thank these people?”

The board director suggested that the RCAM put out a full-page advertisement in the newspaper thanking those who gave their donations—in whatever amount—and those who gave in kind.

But board member Bishop Teodoro Buhain, who was in charge of Radio Veritas’s domestic operations at that time, realized the proposal was a trap. Quickly interjecting, Buhain said the matter could be discussed in another meeting. “We can take that up in the next meeting. Anyway, we have more than a month to prepare,” the board member quoted Buhain as saying.

As it turned out, the proposal was never carried out and no newspaper ads were published identifying the generous donors of Radio Veritas. “Buhain never gave an accounting [of] how much money was raised for the restoration of Radio Veritas,” the source, who was in the meeting, said.<sup>2</sup>

To this day, it is a nagging, multimillion-peso question that remains a mystery.



## CORY'S AND ENRILE'S PLEA FOR RADIO VERITAS

About a month after being installed into power, President Corazon Aquino, together with Defense Secretary Juan Ponce Enrile and Sin, sought for public donations to help restore the damaged Radio Veritas station in Malolos.<sup>3</sup> As reported by *The New York Times* on March 17, 1986, the three EDSA 1 heroes sought P50 million in pledges during a day-long telethon.

This was not the first time that Radio Veritas raised money from public donations. In August 1983, following the assassination of Senator Benigno Aquino Jr., it appealed for funds because it had exceeded its budget for the extended coverage of Aquino's assassination. Buhain raised P1 million for this.<sup>4</sup>

In pleading for donations, Cory Aquino paid tribute to Radio Veritas's role in installing her into power. "The voice of truth can no longer be heard in the Philippines," Aquino was quoted as saying. "More than this, the only Catholic voice in Asia has been silenced. Friends from abroad, I hope, will come to the rescue of Radio Veritas."

In his own taped message, Enrile, who was at the time still enjoying cordial relations with Aquino and Sin, said: "It was through Radio Veritas that we announced the effort launching the military organization to defy finally the oppressive grip of President Marcos and his clique. Without Veritas, it is unlikely that we would have succeeded."

Fidel Ramos, who would later become president, donated 20 cases of beer for the volunteers who took the telephone calls, *The New York Times* reported.

With the Church enjoying tremendous goodwill, an avalanche of donations instantly poured in, with initial reports saying the RCAM was able to raise P20 million. But other sources familiar with the case said the Church was able to raise more or less P100 million.

From March to July of 1986, Buhain said the Church was able to collect P18 million from people from all walks of life.<sup>5</sup> The prelate, who was then executive vice president of Radio Veritas, said individual donations ranged from P10 to P10,000. He even related one moving anecdote, that of a little child bringing her piggy bank and donating it to Radio Veritas. Such a touching example triggered other children to open their own piggy banks and donate their savings to Radio Veritas.

But after the hype and the publicity, nothing was heard of the fundraiser. There was no official accounting, no breakdown of donations, no figures on how much was collected and from whom.

Where did the money go? All this time, the missing money had been one of Buhain's long-held secrets.

## HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Before it became a Philippine broadcasting institution, Radio Veritas, like the Church it served, had humble beginnings. The brainchild of the first Filipino cardinal, Rufino Santos, it was during a gathering of the Catholic bishops of Southeast Asia in 1958 that he proposed a short-wave broadcasting station. At that time, concern was raised about the “silent Church” in communist China and the need to reach them.<sup>6</sup> The bishops liked the idea, and they chose the Philippines as the headquarters.



*Bishop Teodoro Buhain*

Choosing the Philippines was strategic. The country at that time was the only predominantly Catholic nation in Asia: it had a democratic form of government and was one of the few Asian nations that allowed the private licensing of radio stations.<sup>7</sup>

Wasting no time, Cardinal Santos embarked on a massive fundraising activity. In 1960, he was able to convince the West German government to help finance the project. He secured a commitment from West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer to shoulder 75 percent of the project’s cost. In the meantime, Santos registered the Philippine Radio Educational and Information Center (PREIC) to serve as the project’s legal entity. Under the agreement with Adenauer, the Archdiocese of Manila and the PREIC would provide the building, the property, and the personnel for the radio station.

In 1966, technicians from the German electronics firm Siemens and Halske installed two 100-kilowatt transmitters in Malolos, Bulacan. The operations of Radio Veritas were divided into two—domestic and overseas. The home service had been operating since 1967. The test broadcast for the overseas operations followed suit, targeting Asian countries.

In 1969, Radio Veritas officially went on the air. Its inauguration was attended by President Marcos and other dignitaries.

But the station was dogged by financial problems, unprofessional staff, and low morale. The Ramon Magsaysay Foundation, which awarded the radio station the 1986 Ramon Magsaysay for Journalism,

Literature, and Creative Communication Arts, squarely put the blame on Santos in an unflattering history of Radio Veritas.

“Part of the problem may have been Cardinal Santos himself. His concern and attention to detail served the venture well in the establishment years, but his critics fault his too-close scrutiny and his refusal to delegate responsibility for the uninspiring domestic programs and for the eventual collapse of overseas broadcasting. He was accused of disbursing too little money for Philippine programs, and misreading the willingness and ability of other Asian bishops to support the overseas broadcasts. As equipment parts wore out, he made no funds available for replacement. Soon, one transmitter after another failed and overseas operations went off the air completely,” it said.

In August 1973, the station’s overseas department was officially declared closed. On September 3 that year, Santos died at the age of 65 after suffering a stroke.<sup>8</sup> Replacing him was Archbishop Jaime Sin.<sup>9</sup>

The Apostolic Nuncio then, Archbishop Bruno Torpigliani, believed in the project and sought to revive the overseas operations and created a committee to study its rehabilitation. It was estimated that rehabilitation alone would cost \$1.5 million, and \$500,000 was required for its annual operations.

In January 1974, the Episcopal conferences in Asia, through the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference (FABC), agreed to finance Radio Veritas’s overseas operations, with the home operations to be shouldered by RCAM.

Under the agreement, each Episcopal conference would assign a portion of its yearly subsidy from Rome’s Propagation of the Faith.<sup>10</sup> (The Propagation of the Faith, one of the four pontifical mission societies, provides financial support for pastoral and evangelization programs in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other remote regions.)<sup>11</sup> The costs of home service for Radio Veritas, however, would be fully shouldered by the CBCP.

In 1975, Radio Veritas was back on its feet. To delineate functions, Church officials adopted Radio Veritas-Asia (RVA) for the international broadcasts and Radio Veritas-Philippines (RVP) for the domestic broadcasts. Its RVA programs were broadcast to Burma, China, India, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Sri Lanka.

In 1981, Buhain, then a monsignor, was appointed general manager and executive vice president of the Church radio station. He collapsed both the RVA and RVP divisions and grouped these into one, with one set of administrators.

It was during his term that Radio Veritas attracted a major following with the domestic audience. The radio station’s coverage of the return of Marcos’s main political rival, Senator Benigno Aquino Jr., and his assassination in 1983 at a time of a suppressed press, had earned it admirers. Then came EDSA 1, which sealed the radio station’s spot in Philippine history.

## ABRUPT RESIGNATION

The Vatican accepted the courtesy resignation of Buhain at the age of 66, or nine years before the compulsory retirement for bishops and archbishops. He was the third Manila auxiliary bishop in succession who resigned before Sin stepped down as cardinal. The two others were Bishop Crisostomo Yalung and Bishop Teodoro Bacani, both protégés of Sin, who were embroiled in scandals that triggered their abrupt resignations.

Fifteen days after his 75th birthday, Rome accepted the compulsory retirement of Sin, in a move that surprised not a few in Church circles.<sup>12</sup> While the mandatory age of retirement for priests, bishops, archbishops, and cardinals is 75, it is not unusual for the Vatican to extend one's tenure beyond the mandatory age of retirement. For instance, Rome only accepted the resignation of Manila Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales four years after his compulsory retirement. Rosales retired at the age of 79.<sup>13</sup>

But unlike Rosales, who was still in prime shape, Sin's health had been deteriorating. Still, some Church observers said Sin's failing health was only one of the major reasons why Rome quickly accepted his move to retire.

As Sin's auxiliary bishop, Buhain was supposed to tender his courtesy resignation after Rome confirmed Sin's retirement. There were contrasting reports on the circumstances of his resignation.

Unlike other retirements or resignations of Church higher-ups, Buhain's was not announced to the media. Even the Church spokesman then, Father James Reuter, was not aware of it. It was only in December 2003 that Buhain confirmed his resignation, or more than two months since the Vatican approved it.

When the media found this out, Buhain was still acting as parish priest of the Quiapo Basilica. Buhain said in media interviews that he "begged" the Vatican to accept his courtesy resignation, since his term was "coterminous" with Sin, indicating it was his own volition to take a permanent rest from the Church ministry.<sup>14</sup>

Another source, however, said Cardinal Rosales, who succeeded Sin, had the option of retaining Buhain as auxiliary bishop of Manila, considering he still had nine more years before the compulsory retirement. But Rosales decided against it because of his shady record in the RCAM.

At 66, Buhain was considered too young to give up his priestly duties. But he has had his share of controversies, which most likely caused his early retirement.

The other Sin protégé whom Rosales "kicked out" from the RCAM was former treasurer Monsignor Domingo Cirilos. He was retired from the priesthood.

Unlike most priests, Buhain never had a calling as a disciple of Christ. In his own recollection, he arrived at a conscious decision to become a priest after observing that there were no Catholic priests from his hometown in Bacoor, Cavite. "We had Aglipayan priests, we had doctors, we had dentists, my father was an engineer himself. We had all kinds, but no Catholic priest. Why don't I give it a try? They said it was difficult. Well, yes, let me give it a try."<sup>15, 16</sup>

In Rome, where he pursued further studies, he majored in social sciences and took short courses in social communications while his peers took up theology and Canon law.

“The Holy See (Pope John Paul II) is painfully aware of the circumstances which surrounded your resignation.”

In 1981, after a six-year stint as assistant secretary-general of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, Buhain was tapped by Sin as vicar-general of RCAM and as general manager of Radio Veritas.

In accepting the Radio Veritas job, Buhain proved he was more like a chief executive officer for a private company than a pastor. He secured a commitment from Sin that he would not be bothered by pastoral talks or retreats which other bishops would normally participate in. “I would go out only when it is absolutely necessary... . Requests to give a talk or a retreat, things like that, I will say no.”

He soon became one of Sin's most trusted lieutenants. The cardinal even reserved a room for him in his official residence in Villa San Miguel after the prelate underwent an operation for a massive internal hemorrhage that nearly cost him his life.<sup>17</sup> He also convinced Sin to reorganize the RCAM Curia. To Sin, Buhain was a financial genius.

In 1984, Sin appointed him as bishop in charge of the Arzobispado de Manila, the RCAM's office. He was appointed as vicar for temporalities and ministries, where he handled the RCAM's income-generating companies, such as the Cardinal Santos Memorial Hospital in San Juan. He also held several positions in the boards of some of the Church's corporations, making him one of the more influential Church officials in the RCAM.

## HOUNDED BY CONTROVERSY

In an old boys club like the Catholic Church, to be sidelined at the age of 66 is more the exception than the rule. Most of the time, bishops and archbishops are only retired early due to health reasons, or when they get involved in major scandals. Being “retired” early is an indication of trouble. If a troubled bishop is to be retired, Church officials are told to say “due to health reasons” if anyone asks why.

But except for his near-death experience in the 1980s, Buhain remained in the pink of health. Before his resignation, reports surfaced that Buhain had fathered a child with a Radio Veritas employee and was being investigated by Rome for alleged graft.<sup>18</sup> Expectedly, to Rome, Buhain denied the allegations that he had fathered a child.

“So I asked his Eminence, since there was no investigation, [to] give me a certification saying I did not father a child.”

Buhain admitted “there were whispers” about his sexual and fiscal misconduct, and “Cardinal Sin asked me to explain.” He said he secured an affidavit from the Radio Veritas employee denying the allegations of a romantic relationship and that her child was conceived through artificial insemination.

Pushing the envelope further, Buhain said he pleaded with Sin to conduct an investigation but the cardinal reportedly refused to do so. “So I asked his Eminence, since there was no investigation, [to] give me a certification saying I did not father a child.”<sup>19</sup> Sin supposedly issued a certification clearing him on August 18, 2003, or two weeks before the cardinal turned 75.

Ironically, Buhain was himself responsible for fanning the talks that he fathered a child.

At the height of the scandal involving Bacani, where the prelate admitted to committing “inappropriate advances” to his secretary, the RCAM called for an emergency meeting of the Manila clergy in Villa San Miguel. In that meeting, Buhain unwittingly snared the spotlight from the beleaguered Bacani.

During the meeting, Buhain stood up and claimed that he would be the next to be “frame[d] up.” To the priests’ shock, Buhain referred to a rumor that had been circulating that he had begotten a child by “CS.”<sup>20</sup>

Based on our interviews with clergy members who were present at the meeting, Buhain’s statement caught many by surprise, as some priests had no idea what the rumor was in the first place. Those who heard of it were nonetheless shocked by his revelation, since the rumor was only whispered in Church circles.

Later, confronted about his resignation, Buhain said Rome accepted his resignation on October 31, 2003, on the grounds that his term was coterminous with Sin, and not because of allegations of sexual or fiscal misconduct. But Rome’s reply to his resignation letter hinted at some undercurrents surrounding his resignation.

“The Holy See (Pope John Paul II) is painfully aware of the circumstances which surrounded your resignation. I thank you for your visit to this Congregation and the ecclesial manner by which you received the decision of the Holy Father to accept your resignation.”<sup>21</sup>

“With fraternal concern and affection, I recommend that you turn to the Lord so that He may assist you during this period in your life and throughout your retirement,” the prefect for the Congregation for Bishops, Giovanni Cardinal Re, said in his parting words to Buhain.

A Church lawyer explained that, in practice, when the Vatican wants to kick out a problematic bishop, he is normally asked to resign. “[The] Vatican [did] not want him to continue, that is why he was retired prematurely,” the Church lawyer said.



## VATICAN PROBE ON MISSING FUNDS

Following his retirement, Buhain maintained a low profile, unlike Bacani who continued to be very visible—in and out of the Church. He stayed in a retreat house in Tagaytay and did not attend the regular assembly of the CBCP, unlike other retired bishops.

We sought an interview with him and sent him a letter through a post office box number. He did not reply.

But just before he bowed out from the Church, Buhain gave a clue as to why the Vatican “retired” him prematurely. He confirmed in interviews with Church beat reporters that the Vatican asked him about the “missing” donations for Radio Veritas. “I have explained where the P20 million was used. All they have to do is look at the book, which was audited by the auditing firm SGV (Sycip, Gorres, Velayo & Co).” He said that a portion of the amount was used to repair the five damaged transmitters, to purchase new transmitters, and pay off the debts of Radio Veritas.

Buhain was not telling the entire story.

A month after the EDSA 1 revolution in 1986, Buhain had said in an interview with the Ramon Magsaysay Awards Foundation that the five damaged transmitters had already been repaired by local technicians.<sup>22</sup> “Within a month, we were able to repair all five transmitters and we were able to go on air for our overseas operations.” However, he explained that two 100-watt transmitters, which serviced the overseas operations of Radio Veritas, “could not go on air at full power ... because we did not have the spare tubes.”

Still, that did not stop the Archdiocese of Manila from soliciting funds for the transmitters’ supposed repair. What they did not tell the public, including Cory Aquino and Juan Ponce Enrile, was that the solicited funds were actually meant for the purchase of new transmitters. “We have to plan for the future. And hence we made the decision, let us target [the] acquisition of new transmitters,” Buhain said in the interview.

The local Catholic Church, enjoying a newfound prestige, was not lacking in generous overseas donors.

The Voice of America, through the American embassy, for instance, offered to provide a brand new transmitter to replace the old ones. Based on Buhain’s interview, VOA gave the new equipment for free.

When the German Bishops’ Conference learned about the damaged transmitters, the group volunteered to replace these. Joseph Cardinal Hoffner, then chair of the German Bishops’ Conference, donated one shortwave transmitter.<sup>23</sup>

The German government also donated P60 million, in the form of a 250-kilowatt transmitter.

Armed with all these information, it was only a matter of time before the FABC inquired about the donations. The bishops wrote a letter to Cardinal Sin inquiring about the financial state of Radio Veritas. The request of course was met with stony silence. Attempts to pore over documents and accounting records faced a blank wall.



During the interview with Buhain by the Ramon Magsaysay Foundation, he said donations were used to purchase a 50-kilowatt transmitter. But the FABC was apparently not convinced.

In a vote of no-confidence to Cardinal Sin, the FABC wrote a letter asking him for a reorganization of the board of Radio Veritas. The FABC apparently wanted to put someone who would force the issue of transparency on the donations. This was discussed in one meeting and Sin was advised to tell the FABC that he could not act on the request because there was no vacancy in the first place. “Okay, we will tell them that we cannot accede to the request since there is no vacancy,” Sin said during the meeting.<sup>24</sup>

What Sin did not know was that a Filipino bishop who sat on the board had tendered his resignation, thus creating a vacancy that could trigger a reorganization. When shown the letter of the resignation, Sin said: “Tell that bishop to take back his resignation.”

The issue of the unaccounted Radio Veritas donations was not Buhain’s first brush with questionable accountability. A source familiar with Church dealings said Buhain was involved in a P50-million anomaly that the RCAM contracted with Metrobank for the repair and construction of the Pope Pius XII Catholic Center along UN Avenue in Manila.

The board, however, found out later that only P10 million went to the contractor of the Pope Pius XII construction. They discovered this when Buhain was in the United States. When he came back, he was removed as trustee when he refused to account for the remaining funds.<sup>25</sup>

The issue on where the money went apparently caused the split of Radio Veritas. The FABC initiated the split where it would, from then on, take charge of the overseas operations, while the RCAM would oversee the domestic operations.

But records from the Securities and Exchange Commission showed that as early as June 1987, Sin and Buhain had registered a new corporation under the name Global Broadcasting System which would “primarily engage in the business of operating and maintaining radio and television stations in the Philippines for religious, educational, cultural, and commercial purposes.” It appears that Sin and Buhain had been planning all along to break up with the FABC-controlled Radio Veritas.

In 1990, the company was renamed Radio Veritas Global Broadcasting System Inc., whose primary purpose “is to engage in radio and television broadcasting and communications anywhere in the Philippines.” In 1991, the domestic operations formally split with the overseas operations. Among the incorporators of the new corporation were Cardinal Sin, along with Bishops Buhain, Almario, Protacio Gungon, and Paciano Aniceto. Sin had the largest share, followed by Buhain. The rest had one share each.<sup>26</sup> Buhain was also named treasurer.

It was a divorce waiting to happen.

P a r t T w o

C H A P T E R 7

THE CARDINAL,  
THE KNIGHT,  
AND A FAILED  
CHURCH BANK

ON MAY 9, 1997, FORMER PRESIDENT CORAZON AQUINO, accompanied by her four daughters, including Kris Aquino and her son Joshua, reunited with her Church supporters at the EDSA Shrine Chapel along Ortigas Avenue. It had been 11 years since the EDSA 1 uprising where the Manila archbishop, Jaime Cardinal Sin, played a key role.

But the gathering had neither a connection with the popular uprising nor was it strictly a political event—although the crowd there did sing the “people power” anthem, *Bayan Ko*, after a concelebrated Friday mass. The former president was only returning a favor that Sin gave her while she was ensconced in a convent in Cebu in February 1986, which triggered the revolt.

It was a gathering in defense, this time, of the politically influential Cardinal, who, Church supporters say, was being “besieged by unfair criticisms.”

Sin was not around to join the Church’s favorite daughter. The media-savvy prelate was in Villa San Miguel, the residence of the Archbishop of Manila, suddenly shy and refusing to grant interviews.

Addressing the crowd, Mrs. Aquino cited Sin’s role in the people power revolt and how she was heavily indebted to him. Sin, she said, was a good and holy man—but he was also human, suffering when he was hurt by others.

The Cardinal’s spokesman and protégé Monsignor Socrates Villegas (who became Archbishop of Lingayen-Dagupan), gave an emotional speech. “The last two weeks have been terrible for me. I am very proud that my Archbishop loves me,” Villegas said.

Villegas was referring to the ensuing events that led to the abrupt closure of the former Church-owned bank, Monte de Piedad, in which Villegas ironically was not involved.

On April 25, 1997, Monte de Piedad, the bank of choice of the Church and the religious, declared a bank holiday following a rush of withdrawals.

The closure came two years after the Church sold its controlling stock to banker Vicente Tan. In an instant, thousands of depositors, who were not aware that the Church had already divested its ownership of Monte de Piedad, found themselves unable to withdraw their money.

In Quiapo, Manila, for instance, Church vendors lamented they could not withdraw their earnings, which ranged from P10,000 to P50,000. Some said the money was meant to pay for their children’s tuition as classes opened in June.

In contrast, the Archdiocese of Manila was able to withdraw a sizeable amount of its deposits (although RCAM officials denied this) from the failing savings bank after getting a tip that the bank would declare a bank holiday.

It was a classic case of the shepherd misleading its flock.

If EDSA 1 and EDSA 2 were the height of Sin’s role as shepherd, the Monte de Piedad fiasco was his lowest point.

For 15 days, thousands of bank depositors, who had known all along that Monte de Piedad belonged to the Church, could not withdraw their hard-earned money. (Eventually, they took their money out when the bank reopened.)

At the very least, it exposed the Church's weakness in managing a business, and Sin as a bad financial manager. At its worst, the fiasco exposed a Church that kept silent on the true health of the bank. It showed that Church-appointed board members partook of largesse while the bank was ailing, that some Church leaders engaged in doublespeak to avoid accountability and responsibility, and that they kept the problems and skeletons in the closet at the expense of the banking public.

The whole episode also exposed the incongruity in Sin's character: he was the first to cast a stone against corruption and mismanagement in government but kept his silence—and even protected erring Church members—when it happened in his own backyard. It showed a Cardinal and his priests laying the blame on someone else, without nary a hint of admitting guilt.

Sin, who was not beyond bestowing Papal awards and citations to pay a debt of gratitude, lambasted the media when he was on the receiving end of critical stories, and used his clout and influence to skip a Senate investigation.

## KNIGHT IN SHINING ARMOR

The May 9, 1997, gathering was organized by the Council of the EDSA Shrine, composed of 23 leaders of the EDSA Shrine community, to denounce the alleged “persecution” of Sin purportedly orchestrated by Vicente Tan, who bought Monte de Piedad from the RCAM, and by the media who were supposedly under his payroll.

In a statement, they said the Cardinal “has been the target of written unfair criticism” and likened the attacks on his integrity as a “modern version of crucifixion.”

Since Monte de Piedad’s closure in April 1997, this journalist, then a reporter for *The Manila Times*, wrote extensively on the Monte de Piedad fiasco and how mismanagement from the top led to its demise. Referring to my critical stories, the Council “deplored [Sin’s] trial by publicity and the media’s neglect of the basic principle of journalism.”

They also stood solidly behind Sin, whose reputation they said had “never been tarnished in as many years in the priestly service.” Sin’s brethren bishops also came to his defense, issuing a statement affirming his “personal integrity.”<sup>1</sup>

In a radio interview over ZNN Veritas, run by the Archdiocese of Manila, Sin alleged that Tan was “with the media,” insinuating that the banker had paid journalists to portray himself as the victim.

Overnight, the two good friends became bitter enemies over the Monte fiasco. Only a few months before, as late as February 1997, Sin and Tan enjoyed close ties—so close, in fact, that the Cardinal even asked the Vatican to confer to Tan the Knight Grand Cross of the Pontifical Order of St. Sylvester, one of the most coveted citations given by the Catholic Church to the laity.

The citation is given to any lay member who has been a generous benefactor of the Church or who has helped the Church immensely. The latest Filipino to have received the award, in 2011, was former Chief Justice Hilario Davide Jr. This was conferred by Pope Benedict XVI.<sup>2</sup>

Apparently, Tan was highly qualified as only two years before the bank collapsed, he was the Church’s knight in shining armor, bailing out Monte de Piedad from a possible closure. He would eventually be stripped of the title following Monte de Piedad’s drastic fall from grace.

A failed bank, allegations and counter-allegations of deceit and trickery, and pointing blame soured relations between Sin and Tan. Caught in the middle were the clueless depositors, mostly the poor and the middle class, who thought all along that the Church still owned the bank they trusted.

## THE FINANCIAL GENIUS

Literally translated as “Mountain of Mercy,” Monte de Piedad began as a charitable pawnshop providing loans to the poor in the 1880s.<sup>3</sup> It is considered the first savings bank in the Philippines.

The capitalization of Monte de Piedad was sourced from the Obras Pias, or funds by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Manila (RCAM) used to finance the galleon trade and the Church’s charitable works. When the galleon trade ended, the funds were transferred to bankroll two banks—Banco Español-Filipino and Monte de Piedad. A Franciscan friar, Felix Huertas, was considered to be the brains behind Monte de Piedad, convincing then Archbishop of Manila Pedro Pineiro and Governor General Domingo Murillo to open a bank that would cater to the poor.

It was during the time of Rufino Cardinal Santos, the first Filipino cardinal, that Monte de Piedad thrived. “He was a financial genius,” said Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines legal counsel Sabino Padilla III. “It was during his stewardship of the Archdiocese of Manila that many institutions were built and established that were never equaled by his successors.”

Padilla said Cardinal Santos fortified the finances of the Archdiocese of Manila by having the hindsight to sell large tracts of land before these were subjected to land reform. The cardinal then funneled the money into establishing institutions—both for profit and charity—to sustain the archdiocese’s social and charity works.

From 1953, when he was installed as the 29th Archbishop of Manila, Santos transformed the Archdiocese of Manila from a bankrupt institution following World War II to one of the richest archdioceses in the world.

Among the institutions that Santos established or revived were the war-damaged St. Paul Hospital (later renamed Cardinal Santos Medical Center), the Philippine Trust Company, the Catholic Travel Office, Fidelity Insurance, and Radio Veritas.

It was also early in his term that the Manila Cathedral was rebuilt from the ashes of the war and that the San Carlos Seminary was completed. Santos oversaw the construction of Our Lady of Guadalupe Minor Seminary in Makati; the Pope Pius XII Catholic Center; and the Pontificio Collegio Filippino in Rome, where Filipino seminarians and priests studying in Rome could stay.

He also established Catholic Charities, now known as Caritas Manila, the social arm of the RCAM.<sup>4</sup> It was also during his term that the RCAM poured investments into mining, banking, and other blue-chip stocks.

Thus, when Santos died in 1973, he left the RCAM rolling in money.

## CHURCH OF THE POOR

But Sin, Santos's successor, was no financial genius. To make up for this, the charismatic Cardinal Sin surrounded himself with financial advisers.

A source who had worked with Santos and Sin compared the management style of the two: "Cardinal Santos was more a hands-on manager while Sin's decisions were based on the reports and recommendations of his trusted aides."

While Sin's style was definitely more collegial, it was also definitely more prone to abuse by those he trusted. This flaw was exposed during the fall of Monte de Piedad.

In July 1991, the RCAM embarked on a new project for the poor as part of its new direction to become a "Church of the Poor." This was the new vision and mission of the Church. It arose from the proceedings of the Second Plenary Council in 1990, organized by Church leaders, lay leaders, and the religious.

Monte de Piedad was tapped as one of the major vehicles that would advance the Church's new credo. At that time, the board of directors of Monte de Piedad included Monsignor Domingo Cirilos, then the treasurer of RCAM and Sin's representative in the board.

That year, Monte de Piedad decided to expand its loan program to include financing via conduit establishments. Using the bank's money, the conduits would take charge of the loan and make the collections. The conduit was supposed to remit the payment to the bank.

Initially targeting teachers, the program was expanded to tricycle operators and drivers' associations, with Strategic Lending Inc. (SLI), a company with a capitalization of P100,000, tapped as the conduit. SLI was owned by the couple Fiorello Panopio and Vicky Lee.

Why did the bank management tap SLI despite its meager capitalization?

## MONEY-MAKER AND MONEY-TAKER

Church insiders said the people behind SLI were known to Cirilos, who was then one of Sin's favorite and most trusted aides. An accountant, Cirilos hailed from Iloilo, where Sin also came from. (We inquired about Cirilos's whereabouts, but our sources had no information.)

According to one source, Cirilos had proven his financial acumen to Sin when he successfully brokered a sale of Church real estate properties at a hefty price. He thus gained the Cardinal's trust and confidence.

Unlike his other known protégés such as Father Socrates Villegas (now Lingayen-Dagupan Archbishop), Bishop Crisostomo Yalung, and Bishop Teodoro Bacani (the latter two resigned), Cirilos was lesser known, operating under the radar. But Sin was just as protective of Cirilos.

Aside from his position as treasurer of the RCAM, Cirilos wore several other hats. He was president and board director of the Philippine Realty Corp., which handled the real properties of RCAM; and chairman of the board of directors of Fidelity Insurance Inc., which also became saddled with financial problems.

Despite his ties with the SLI group and being among those named responsible for the bank's collapse, Cirilos escaped Sin's wrath. When things started to sour in Monte de Piedad, he was removed as board director and was replaced as treasurer of RCAM.

But it was only a temporary setback.

Cirilos was named parish priest of Paco, one of the most coveted parish assignments in Manila. He replaced Bishop Bacani, who was assigned to a different post after rumors swirled that he was having an affair with a parishioner there. Bacani would eventually be named as Novaliches bishop until his "inappropriate" gesture to his secretary exploded in the media.

Bacani, however, was a tough act to follow.

Sometime in 1996, Paco parishioners appealed to Sin to replace Cirilos for being "materialistic, dictatorial, anti-poor and heartless." He ordered the removal of the ambulant vendors inside the Paco Church compound.<sup>5</sup>

Proving his financial acumen, he hiked the monthly fee of the vendors to P2,500. In contrast, Bacani only sought token amounts, in consideration of the situation of the poor. When the vendors refused to vacate the premises, he filed a case against them before the Manila Metropolitan Trial Court.

The Paco Parish Cooperative Office was also forced to close down after Cirilos increased the monthly rent to P10,000.

Sometime in December 1998, the vendors sought an audience with Sin to air their grievances against Cirilos. It was a futile effort, as Sin, who had always projected himself as pro-poor, took the side of Cirilos. "The Cardinal told us, 'You will no longer find another priest like him. He is an accountant. He is going to build a five-story building,'" one complaining parishioner said.



As a consolation, Sin offered them calendars as giveaways, but the parishioners left without taking any.

Cirilos actually oversaw the construction of a five-story building, which he named Cardinal Sin Building in honor of his patron. The upper floors were converted into classrooms for the Paco Catholic School while business establishments occupied the ground floor. Taxation issues hounded the business establishments located there.<sup>6</sup>

## THE TALE OF THE FALL

As early as June 1994, or three years after the tricycle loan program was initiated, the accounting firm Sycip, Gorres, Velayo & Co. (SGV) had already warned about the increasing loan exposure to the tricycle drivers. The SGV was then the external auditor of Monte de Piedad. “We pointed out clearly the increase in consumption loans in 1994, 1995, and 1996 financial statements and noted other deficiencies,” SGV said in a statement.<sup>7</sup>

The board at that time was headed by former Chief Justice Jose Feria, with Noli Bajada as president. Other members of the board were Buhain and Cirilos.

During a Senate investigation, Monte de Piedad executive vice president Ernesto Manlapaz told senators that past-due accounts steadily rose from P6 million in 1992 to P21.2 million in 1993 and P106.5 million in 1994. By the time of the bank run in April 1997, the bad debts had ballooned to P1.8 billion. This meant that while the bank continued to extend loans, it had not been getting any returns from its investments.

But the board apparently ignored the SGV’s warning.

Was Sin aware of what was happening with the bank? And how long before was he told about the extent of the problem?

It appeared that union officials of the bank had seen the writing on the wall as early as 1993 when payments from the supposed loans became delinquent. Union officials asked the RCAM to conduct a separate audit of the loans.

Sin’s spokesman, Monsignor Villegas, said the RCAM saw some problems which prompted the RCAM “to undertake some review and improvement in the management of its institution.” An archdiocese team, he said, notified the board “to look into the system” and “in the examination, the loan problem came up.”<sup>8</sup>

What Villegas did not say was that the RCAM already knew the gravity of the situation. Its audit team found that most of the supposed tricycle borrowers were fictitious.

Still, Sin took a passive approach to the problem. But the Papal Nuncio then, Archbishop Gian Vincenzo Moreni, could no longer keep his silence.

A source, who was privy to RCAM’s financial dealings, notified the Nuncio about the escalating loan problem of Monte de Piedad. In early 1995, the Nuncio gave Sin his own take on the issue: “If it was my money and my friends stole it, I might have only charged it to experience. But that is not my money, nor is it yours. Why are you not shouting and screaming?” Moreni told Sin.<sup>9</sup>

Sin was clearly being admonished to punish his trusted financial advisers and board members, who were all appointed by him.

Sin did follow the Nuncio’s advice, but only to a token extent. His solution was to remove Cirilos as RCAM treasurer—but transferred him to the Paco Parish, one of the largest parishes under the RCAM, to replace Bacani. The young upstart Bishop Crisostomo Yalung, whose task was to clean up the mess,

replaced Cirilos.

In the meantime, Sin kept Buhain, who stayed on until a new management of Monte de Piedad took over. Buhain was later transferred to the Quiapo Parish, another plum assignment.

## MILKING MONTE DE PIEDAD

While Monte de Piedad was slowly bleeding from its growing past-due loans, board members appointed by Sin could not care less, splurging on amenities and perks using the bank's money. A source who had extensive information about Monte de Piedad's affairs said the perks enjoyed by the board members ranged from expensive to scandalous.

An avid tennis fan, Cirilos, the source said, would often go to London to watch Wimbledon tennis matches. Apart from out-of-town trips, Cirilos would also charge his personal expenses to the bank.

“If it was my money and my friends stole it, I might have only charged it to experience. But that is not my money, nor is it yours. Why are you not shouting and screaming?”

In one account, a bank executive even had the gall to request reimbursement for a “meeting” at the Victoria Court motel. “That one took the cake. One bishop, who obviously did not know what a Victoria Court motel is, assumed that the bank executive may have met somebody there for a business meeting,” the source said.

Before the scam was exposed and with the bank already bleeding, bank officials awarded themselves with hefty cash dividends that amounted to P87.2 million from 1990 to 1994. Of this amount, the RCAM, which controlled 70 percent of Monte de Piedad, got P61.04 million.<sup>10</sup>

During a Senate hearing, it was revealed that at one time, bank president Noli Bajada even got a cash dividend of P1.3 million while Cirilos received P212,000.<sup>11</sup>

The hefty cash rewards came as officials window-dressed the bank's real status. Since the tricycle loan was implemented, Monte de Piedad reported a growing net income, averaging 98 percent from 1991 to 1994. Consumer loans, however, were also growing—P633 million in 1992, P1.6 billion in 1993, and P2.7 billion in 1994. The problem was that the bank could not collect the loan payments.

Even after the loan irregularity was uncovered, Bajada got a handsome retirement bonanza when he quit in April 1995, including keeping two cars issued to him, bonuses, a share in the profit-sharing scheme, and tax credits. He said he was entitled to such benefits for having served the Church “so faithfully, with great sacrifice [to] my family which I had to leave including our business in the United States.”<sup>12</sup>

## PILLAGED TWICE OVER

It was not only the Church-appointed managers and board directors who pillaged the coffers of Monte. The supposed knight in shining armor, Vicente Tan, also raped the bank of its resources.

On September 27, 1995, or a few months after a solution was reached to sell the ailing Church bank, Tan acquired Monte de Piedad with a P100-million down payment. The sale was brokered by a “clean-up board” led by banker and Church financial adviser Vitaliano Nanagas and Bishop Crisostomo Yalung.

It was agreed that Tan would infuse P1.5 billion in fresh capital to revive the bank. This did not come to pass.

In November 1995, to tighten his hold of the bank, Tan bought the minority shares of two board members at double their original price.<sup>13</sup> But there was a catch: he bought the shares by drawing out a P350-million loan from the bank.

At the time that Tan gained control of the bank, Monte de Piedad’s assets stood only at P500 million. By using its remaining assets to buy out other stockholders, Tan essentially wiped out the bank’s entire assets.

Tan also transferred Monte de Piedad’s properties to his name, including real estate properties in San Juan City in Metro Manila and in Cebu. Tan also used the loan from Monte de Piedad to invest in other companies such as Inter-Asia Land Development Corp. and Pacific Rim Capital Corp.<sup>14</sup>

At a Senate hearing, Tan was confronted by Senator Juan Ponce Enrile, who alleged that the businessman was “milking” Monte de Piedad and “frying the depositors in their own lard.” In that hearing, Tan also admitted he had not paid the P355-million loan he owed Monte de Piedad.

While Tan was systematically ransacking the bank, Sin still honored him with one of the highest accolades that the Catholic Church could confer on the laity.

## NEGOTIATING IN BAD FAITH

In the first place, choosing Tan as Monte de Piedad's white knight was a curious one. A source disclosed that the Catholic Church had a bad experience with Tan in the 1970s. "It seemed that they never learned, or refuse to learn, the lesson," the source said.<sup>15</sup>

At that time, Tan was at the helm of Continental Bank which was also then about to collapse. Trying to salvage his own bank, Tan sought negotiations with the RCAM-controlled Philippine Trust Company (PTC).

The RCAM, the source recalled, entertained Tan's overture to take control of PTC but on the condition that he would not merge the bank with his ailing Continental Bank. In one board meeting, Tan tried to pull a fast one when he drew up a memorandum of agreement that precisely called for the merger between PTC and Continental Bank.

One lawyer, a long-time counsel of the Church, questioned the memorandum, citing the no-merger clause earlier agreed upon in principle with Tan. This did not sit well with Tan, who, in a fit of anger, threw an ashtray at the lawyer.

This frightened other PTC board members who were present and they left the board meeting in a huff. Needless to say, Tan's merger plan did not push through.

As the Monte de Piedad mess slowly unfolded, both Sin and Tan blamed each other for the bank's bankruptcy. Tan accused the RCAM of hiding the truth about the extent of the bad loans. For his part, Sin said Tan knew it all along, having been provided with all the documents related to Monte de Piedad.

Months before Tan took over, auditing firm SGV had called the attention of the RCAM on "the seriousness of the problem."<sup>16</sup> Among the SGV's recommendations were: a) rush the updating of SLI records; b) undertake a complete inventory of documents pertinent to the consumer loans; and c) build up an allowance for such receivables.

By August 1995, Tan was already negotiating with the archdiocese for the purchase of its majority shares in the bank. He hired the services of another auditing firm, Punongbayan and Araullo, to conduct due diligence on the bank.

Was Tan unaware of the extent of the problem, as he had claimed?

In an interview with bank employees at that time, Tan supposedly expressed surprise when he was asked how he was going to address the bad loans that Monte de Piedad had extended to tricycle drivers through SLI. This was confirmed by the separate audit conducted by Punongbayan and Araullo, which detected the anomalous loan and irregularities which escaped the scrutiny of the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas and SGV.

In his letter to President Fidel V. Ramos, Tan said that he was led into thinking that the "uncollectibles were at least P350 million and not to exceed P500 million." He wrote the President to complain that the BSP and the Philippine Deposit Insurance "did not immediately extend assistance" to Monte de Piedad.

But this was disputed by Church officials who pointed out that Tan “is by no means a novice in the banking business.”<sup>17</sup> In a statement by the RCAM’s body of priests, the presbyterium insisted that “all available information regarding the bank’s true state had been known to the buyer. Never was there any intent to deceive on the part of the Church authorities in charge of the bank.”

Tan would later soften his stance on Sin, saying he and the RCAM actually “were both uncertain” about the extent of the problem.<sup>18</sup>

Instead, Tan put the blame on the people representing the RCAM. “I would like to reiterate my love for the Church. My deep gratitude stems from having been made a member of the papal family, despite my unworthiness,” Tan said, apparently referring to his Knight of St. Sylvester award.

Tan insisted that during the negotiations, what the RCAM presented was “that the estimated uncollected loans amount to only P350 million and not to exceed P500 million.” It was only on October 12, 1995, when Punongbayan and Araullo, in a due-diligence report, discovered that the uncollected loans “as presented by the RCAM is not the same as the audit findings.”

## CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE

In all this, was Cardinal Sin, as the chief executive officer of the RCAM's business interests, faultless?

As RCAM administrator, Sin was supposed to be on top of the situation and should have been more circumspect in tapping people to manage the RCAM businesses. A stickler for detail, Sin supposedly got updated almost every day on the cash status of RCAM businesses and that no major decisions were undertaken without Sin's go signal.

The only possible explanation was that Sin was also kept in the dark about the true state of health of Monte de Piedad by the persons he trusted. As for the Sin-appointed board members, Yalung and Buhain apparently failed to report this to the cardinal or they may have simply been totally unaware. Yalung, for one, failed to attend 50 percent of the board meetings, as the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas found out.

Still, while he may not be guilty of the sin of commission, Sin was culpable for the sin of omission. Critics had pointed out that the cardinal failed to lift a finger to punish those responsible for the bank's collapse. Moreover, he was part of the conspiracy of silence in hiding the bank's situation.

Despite the RCAM's internal audit (when the bank was still controlled by the Church), showing negligence on the part of Sin's appointed officials both in the management and in the board, the cardinal did not file appropriate charges against them. The responsibility fell on the BSP, long after Tan had assumed control of the bank, to run after the erring Church officials.

Sin also did not push for the prosecution of the people behind SLI, when they were clearly the immediate cause of the bank's near-bankruptcy. Instead of going after those responsible, Sin opted for the swift sale of Monte de Piedad, a transaction cloaked in secrecy.

The BSP had determined that the Monte de Piedad board of directors, when it was still under the RCAM, were guilty of conducting unsound banking practices and should be penalized. The old Monte de Piedad board was composed of Justice Jose Feria, Noli Bajada, Christopher Lim, Genaro S. Herrera, Mario D. Camacho, Monsignor Teodoro Buhain, Monsignor Domingo Cirilos Jr., Ramon Manaloto, and Benjie Ledesma.

“Sin was very protective of his priests, that any scandal should be kept within the family ...”

The central bank also recommended that charges be filed against SLI.

Cirilos and Buhain had both washed their hands of it, saying they were not part of the day-to-day operations of the bank. As board members, they said their role was limited to policymaking.<sup>19</sup>

For Sin, apparently, their explanation was good enough.



The cardinal, who had been very vocal against any form of corruption and abuse, who was known not to mince words against any perceived irregularity in government, was extraordinarily silent this time. A former archbishop said Sin “was very protective of his priests, that any scandal for that matter should be kept within the family ...” On several occasions, Sin had always said he loved his priests—and that they loved him back.

Not a few high-ranking Church people, however, disapproved of Sin’s protective stance toward his priests, especially with his protégés. In the case of Monte de Piedad, those who had a hand in the collapse of the bank went on to have financially lucrative parish assignments. “This sent a wrong signal ... that you can get away with your shenanigans after asking forgiveness from the cardinal. Justice was sacrificed,” the former archbishop said.

At the height of the scandal, Sin issued two pastoral statements, one defending Cirilos and the other calling on his priests to “be simple and celibate.” In a statement issued on April 27, 1997, Sin exonerated Cirilos from any responsibility in the collapse of Monte de Piedad. “He is not perfect, but is there anyone who is? He was transferred to Paco Parish as part of the regular reassignments of my clergy. Please do not put malice where there is none.”

In a statement issued on May 24, 1997, titled “Be Simple and Celibate,” Sin reminded his priests that their vocation was about saving souls and not amassing wealth. “We are not priests for pay... . Keep your tastes simple, your choice of clothes austere, and your recreation plain.”

The cardinal issued the statement following reports that his self-appointed board members and Monte de Piedad managers were indulging in perks.

## TAXPAYERS' EXPENSE

Meanwhile, the Panopio couple, who were behind SLI, founded Prime Savings Bank which also went kaput. It had been rumored that they were able to put up the bank using Monte de Piedad's resources. Senator Enrile, in a privilege speech, found that Fiorello Panopio had put up a car insurance firm involved in counterfeiting schemes.<sup>20</sup>

Who were the real losers in this whole mess? The taxpayers, of course.

In May 1997, Singapore multinational firm Keppel acquired Monte de Piedad, but part of the rescue package included spending taxpayers' money. The Philippine Deposit Insurance Corp. (PDIC) shelled out P1.7 billion to bail out Monte de Piedad. A second loan of P1.3 billion, to be provided by the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, was disallowed by the Commission on Audit.<sup>21</sup> The COA also rejected a move by the PDIC to condone some P325 million in loans to Monte De Piedad.<sup>22</sup>

It appears that Sin's trusted aides got away with their bad decisions.

P a r t T w o

C H A P T E R 8

FOR THE LOVE  
OF MAMMON

ON AUGUST 27, 2012, A GROUP OF LAY LEADERS IN Parañaque held a “Public Forum on Transparency and Accountability” to shed light on the controversy that had been hounding the Parañaque diocese under Bishop Jesse Mercado.

The forum, organized by the Lay Initiative for Transparency and Accountability, a newly organized group, sought to raise questions as well as find solutions to the financial problems besetting the diocese. It could be the first time that such a forum was initiated by the lay people, keeping in mind that they, too, are part of the Catholic Church.

A few days before the forum, Chancellor Father Carmelo Estores issued a circular to the entire Parañaque diocese stating that the dialogue did not have the Church’s support.

“This forum is not recognized [or] endorsed by the bishop. With regard to issues raised about transparency in the Diocese, the Bishop has submitted his report to the Apostolic Nuncio. Moreover, the Oeconomus (or the Diocesan financial administrator) as well as the Diocesan finance council have explained in detail the facts pertinent to the unfounded allegations,” the circular said.<sup>1</sup>

Two days later, Estores issued another circular to all priests, this time asking them to read a post-communion prayer that Sunday titled “Panalangin Para Mamayani ang Katotohanan (Prayer for Truth to Prevail).”<sup>2</sup> The prayer invoked God to crush “kasamaan at kasinungalian (evil and lies),” and sought divine intervention for truth to prevail.

The post-communion prayer was apparently directed against the public forum to be held the next day. Still, around 200 people came to the financial forum.

A few weeks earlier, the diocese of Parañaque came under fire after it was reported that donations were not being used for the intended purposes. Thus, the forum came on the heels of allegations of financial mismanagement by the diocese, particularly the millions of pesos in donations solicited for victims of calamities. Reportedly, portions of donations for calamity victims had been withheld for release and were reinvested in other money-making ventures of the Church.

Estores’s twin circulars underscored the Church’s tight guarding of its finances. They were a throwback to the Medieval Ages when Church leaders had the sole authority over money matters and impertinent lay people were considered a nuisance, if not heretics. Anyone who challenged the authority of the Church was not part of it.

They also betrayed previous statements of the Church asking the lay people for greater participation in Church and political affairs, and its preaching of transparency and accountability.

The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines stated that “the proper role of the Laity in the Church and in society should be continually promoted ... The lay people should be encouraged and assisted to assume their duty and responsibility of participating in public life and in reforming this according to the Gospel values.”<sup>3</sup>

In its Pastoral Exhortation on the Philippine Economy, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the

Philippines specifically asked the government “to restore people’s confidence in the system by greater transparency.”<sup>4</sup>

In a pastoral statement titled “Let Integrity Flow Like a Stream” issued in July 2003, the CBCP “urge[d] government to form alliances with concerned citizens’ groups, including legal right, with detailed information on budgets and expenditures.”

The bishops further urged that “citizens’ groups should also help in lifestyle checks on government officials. Government officials who show themselves reluctant to share such information should be immediately suspected of having something to hide. The prosecution of erring officials must be carried out vigorously and effectively.”<sup>5</sup>

But when it came to a public scrutiny of its own institution and officials, the Church—the diocese of Parañaque in particular—did not practice what it preached.

## SEEDS OF RESTIVENESS

The forum on August 27 was staged by lay leaders who were out of the loop on the actual state of the Parañaque diocese's finances. The clamor started on a slow note, gaining crescendo as more priests who were growing more restive under Mercado joined the chorus.

As expected, Mercado snubbed the forum, although he was invited by the organizers. Parishioners who attended the forum were vocal in expressing their disappointment. "We want to hear it directly from the bishop. These people, the ordinary parishioners and the faithful, have questions that we church workers could not answer," the *Manila Standard Today* quoted Dr. Erwin Carabeo, a former president of the pastoral council of St. Andrew's Cathedral, the seat of the Parañaque diocese.<sup>6</sup>

But one cannot teach old dogs new tricks. Since he was appointed bishop of Parañaque in December 2002, the bishop had maintained an iron grip on the diocese's finances, as well as its darkest secrets. Thus, at the slightest hint of challenge to that authority, he was the first to put a lid on it.

The first sign of rumblings started right within the diocese's ranks when Mercado began playing favorites with his priests, including covering up their excesses and indiscretions. But just like the 12 apostles, among whom Christ had his favorites, one was bound to betray Mercado. It was a betrayal imbued with good intentions.

The seeds of discontent were first sowed when Mercado began tightening the budget for social programs even when he demanded increased remittances from the parishes. This was one of the complaints some grumbling priests raised before the Papal Nuncio when they wrote him about Mercado.

"If the media gets hold of these affairs, the diocese and our Church will be further wounded and damaged and our credibility brought into question."

"We are hoping and praying for immediate action and intervention. The funds came from the hard-earned money of the generous parishioners. Many of those who gave belong to the poor communities. They willingly shared and gave whatever they have because they have been empowered to help those who are in most need. And yet, their generosity has been abused because of the mishandling of funds of the diocese," one letter to the Nuncio said.<sup>7</sup>

In a follow-up letter sent by the "concerned clergy of the diocese of Parañaque," it warned that the priests already had low morale and that "the inaction and the apathy of the bishop ... may only aggravate the already worsening situation." The letter also warned that "if the media gets hold of these affairs, the diocese and our Church will be further wounded and damaged and our credibility brought into question."<sup>8</sup>

A third letter detailed the alleged "repeated and scandalous pattern where the intentions of the donors were not respected" and tagged the questionable role of Mercado's secretary, Anita Cruz, in major

decision-making and handling of the diocese's finances.<sup>9</sup>

Some priests began questioning the diocese's actual financial state after some lay leaders and Church volunteers asked for funds for social programs. "We knew how much was being collected from parishioners and corporate donors. When people ask us where are funds for this and that project, we cannot provide answers," one volunteer said.<sup>10</sup>

One major complaint raised by some priests was the fact that Cruz, the bishop's executive secretary, seemed to wield significant power. She was the force behind Mercado. "No funds were to be released without her go signal. She controlled the purse; she was more powerful than the Oeconomus (the diocesan finance administrator)," one Parañaque priest remarked.

## THE POWER BEHIND THE THRONE

Cruz's actual role in the diocese had been the subject of small talk, naughty ribbing, and malicious gossip within the diocese of Parañaque. "She controls the bishop. We wonder why the bishop trusts her that much, more than his priests," one disgruntled priest said.<sup>11</sup> Letters sent by disgruntled priests to the Apostolic Nuncio also questioned Cruz's actual function and role in the diocese.<sup>12</sup>

In his reply to the Nuncio, Mercado said Cruz had been a member of the diocesan finance council since 2003. Enumerating Cruz's functions, the bishop virtually confirmed she held the power of the purse.

Among her functions, as Mercado enumerated, were to: 1) report directly to the Oeconomus on all matters pertaining to the financial administration of the diocese; 2) prepare annual budgets; 3) direct the preparation of financial reports and summarize forecasts of the diocesan financial position; 4) oversee the investment of funds; 5) read and review documents attached to checks for approval, for accuracy's sake; 6) present to the Oeconomus all invoices; 7) direct the accountants in payroll preparation; 8) monitor collection of past and due accounts of the diocese; 9) monitor and control the flow of cash receipts and disbursements; 10) direct the accountant in monthly reconciliation; 11) coordinate with the auditor for audit; 12) monitor special collections and ensure that they are remitted in due time; 13) make sure that all payments such as to the Social Security System (SSS) and Meralco are made on time; and 14) monitor all payments of insurance, retirement funds, and health care.<sup>13</sup>

Those who refused to toe the line, those who bypassed Cruz, were punished accordingly. One of them was Father Greg Ramos, former parish priest of the Our Lady of Pillar, who headed the ministry of social services and development, and chaired Caritas Parañaque.<sup>14</sup>

Following the onslaught of typhoon Ondoy in 2009, Ramos, who had a nine-year stint with the Philippine Army after graduating from the Philippine Military Academy in 1981, spearheaded a fundraising drive to help the calamity victims. Corporate donors like Shoemart, United Laboratories, Kraft, Ace Hardware, and National Bookstore each gave P25,000.<sup>15</sup>

As time was of the essence, Ramos, who was a co-signatory in the Caritas account, ordered the immediate release of some of the funds for the Ondoy victims. Ramos, who had spent time in Mindanao and was among those investigated by the Davide Commission for sympathizing with the military rebels in the failed 1989 coup against former President Corazon Aquino, was no stranger to quick reaction.<sup>16</sup> "Since the purpose was to help in the rehabilitation of those affected, intervention should be quick," the parish volunteer related.

Ramos's action did not sit well with Mercado, or for that matter, with Cruz, his executive secretary. When Ramos returned to the diocese after a sabbatical trip to Spain, he found out he had been replaced as director of Caritas Parañaque. No explanation was given for his removal.



## RAPING THE PARISH

In contrast to Ramos's case, Mercado was quick to forget and forgive priests who mishandled Church funds.

Kept hidden for six years, Father Bayani Valenzuela's misappropriation of the St. Andrew's School funds amounting to P14 million was only known after he was replaced by activist priest Monsignor Manuel Gabriel, who was also considered the Church expert on Basic Ecclesial Communities.

In 1998, while he was director of St. Andrew's School, Valenzuela forged the signature of the board of directors and invested multimillion-peso school funds with Prime Bank.<sup>17</sup> A year later, Prime Bank declared a bank holiday and was placed under the receivership of the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas. This put the investment in jeopardy.<sup>18</sup>

In 2004, Valenzuela was replaced by Gabriel, who ordered an internal audit. He was shocked when he learned about the P14 million that vanished into thin air. In an interview, Gabriel said he uncovered more financial irregularities committed by his predecessor. To use the term of a lay leader, Valenzuela "repeatedly raped Church funds."

With a lifestyle fit for a king, Valenzuela would charge his personal expenses to the school funds—from his gym fees in Shangri-La Hotel in Makati to his massage sessions and meals in expensive restaurants. He also owned a unit at the Cityland Wack Wack Royal Mansion where he was living, as shown by a statement of account that I was provided. He shared the largesse with his relatives, approving, for instance, a vehicle loan for a niece using school funds.<sup>19</sup>

Valenzuela also charged chancery expenses for utilities like electricity and water, and salaries of janitorial and security services to the school funds, when these should have been charged to the parish. Stipends for saying Masses were also charged to the school. (Priests get fees or stipends for each Mass that they say. The amount depends on each diocese, as determined by the bishop.)

Based on accounts by parish employees, no one exactly knew how much was being collected from Sunday Masses, since all collections were counted inside Valenzuela's private room. Valenzuela tapped three relatives to act as his trusted aides. He was also found to have maintained five different bank accounts.

Following Prime Bank's closure, the P500,000 insurance covered by the Philippine Deposit Insurance Corporation was remitted to his personal bank account instead of the school's.<sup>20</sup>

“Does Monsignor Valenzuela's termination, floating status, and exile not constitute punishment? He is no longer entitled to pension and hospitalization. Is this not enough punishment?”

Gabriel said he asked Mercado “to put a closure” to his predecessor’s act of plundering Church and school funds. By this, he meant filing a case against Valenzuela and recovering the Church money. But what could you expect from a bishop who never had any experience running a parish, and to whom accountability seemed to be an alien concept?

The closure came six years after the irregularities were uncovered and after Gabriel had been transferred to another parish. It was not the closure that Gabriel had expected.

In a board resolution dated December 15, 2011, Mercado, as chairman of the board of St. Andrew’s School, along with four other board members who were also priests, “approved the closure on the case of Monsignor Bayani Valenzuela” by writing off some P10 million in uncollectibles from the P14-million bad investment in Prime Bank. The resolution noted that Valenzuela had already been terminated from his position as school director and member of the Board of Trustees and had been put on “floating” status with no particular parish assignment.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, this was the Church’s version of justice tempered with mercy.

Replying to the exclusive report in *Rappler* on the alleged diversion of funds for calamity victims,<sup>22</sup> Mercado stressed that Valenzuela had been sufficiently punished. “Does Monsignor Valenzuela’s termination, floating status, and exile not constitute punishment? He is no longer entitled to pension and hospitalization. Is this not enough punishment?”<sup>23</sup>

What Mercado did not say, however, was that he gave clearance to Valenzuela to resume his priestly duties in New York where the latter sought to revive his vocation. Priests who want a transfer of assignment outside of the diocese where he has been incardinated are required to present proof of clearance from his immediate bishop. The proof of clearance indicates that the priest is of good moral standing in the diocese. Obviously, Valenzuela did not enjoy such standing. He failed to snag the New York position.

(In November 2012, some Parañaque parishioners sent a letter to New York Archbishop Cardinal Timothy Dolan asking for Valenzuela’s whereabouts. As of early January 2013, they had not yet received a reply.)

## BANK DEPOSITS

While it was easy for Mercado to condone financial misappropriations, he was, however, tightfisted in providing and releasing money for social programs in both the diocesan and parochial level. When priests found out Valenzuela's case, they began raising questions about Mercado's managerial ability, especially on finances.

How come, they asked, that the bishop's standard reply was that there were no funds for social programs, when huge amounts of collections and donations were being remitted to the diocese from the parishes?

At a finance forum with Parañaque priests on July 12, 2012, Father Gerald Mascariñas, who acted as the Oeconomus of the diocese or the chief executive officer, revealed that the annual gross income of the Parañaque diocese had risen to P190 million, from P140 million in 2002. This huge amount made Parañaque the second-biggest donor among the dioceses nationwide (with the exception of the Archdiocese of Manila) to the Pontifical Mission Societies (Philippines), Mascariñas said. (The Pontifical Mission Societies serves as the evangelization and social arm of the Vatican.) In fact, the Parañaque diocese was also second in remittances to the CBCP and the Apostolic Nunciature, he added.<sup>24</sup>

Less expenses, operational costs, liabilities, and accounts payable like SSS, Philhealth, and Medicare, the diocese fund stood at P86 million, based on the balance sheet as of May 2012.<sup>25</sup> The diocesan fund was then put in deposit investments under the Bank of the Philippine Islands, where the Church is a major stockholder.

Below is the breakdown of the diocese's cash in bank:

Cash in bank—BPI#0321-0219-99	P 2.937 million
Cash in bank—\$0324-0156-71	P 2.440 million
Cash in bank—BPI#0321-0230-02	P 1.134 million
BPI Special Deposit Account	P 91.520 million
Time Deposit	P 2 million
Investment Dollars	P 12.574 million

The diocese also put some of its money in long-term investments:

Standard Chartered—RTB#0106890	P 10 million
Development Bank of the Philippines	P 500,000
Ayala Land	P 2 million

Out of these funds, however, only about P3.5 million was allotted for programmed funds in 2009 and P6.9 million in 2010. Mascariñas did not provide figures for 2011 and 2012 during the clerics' forum.

Priests we interviewed said that even with the small money allotted for the diocesan-wide social programs, only some portions of the funds were released. Moreover, these were delayed since they had to be approved by Cruz.

In his explanation to the priests, Mascariñas admitted as much: “The Bishop never said that there was no money. He required that the commissions submit an annual budget in order to ensure that funds were utilized according to approved budgets. Budget funds are released in tranches. Subsequent tranches were released when previous tranches were properly liquidated.”

Mascariñas said “the diocese was initially very lax in providing funds for the different commissions until some anomalies were discovered.” He was silent about what these anomalies were, and who should be held accountable, if ever they were held accountable.

## DIVERTED CALAMITY FUND

The forum was held to answer allegations that the diocese had not been transparent with its finances. For too long, priests had been demanding that Mercado open the books but he resisted these demands. It was not until some of the disgruntled priests found a smoking gun. It concerned the donations that the dioceses had received for calamity funds and those that had been remitted by the parishes.

A ledger report provided by a chancery staff showed that the diocese racked up millions of donations to help those hit by the series of calamities, in and outside the country. For typhoon Ondoy in 2009, the financial report showed it collected P1.6 million.

Following the earthquake in Haiti in January 2010, generous parishioners pooled P1 million in donations. Also in May that same year, when a fire rendered homeless some 4,000 families,<sup>26</sup> parishioners shelled out almost P130,000. When typhoon Sendong struck in December 2011, hitting Mindanao the hardest, parishioners raised P3.4 million.

But the ledger report showed a disturbing pattern. The diocese withheld the release of P1.368 million intended for Ondoy victims, while keeping P970,589 intended for Sendong victims. For the Haiti collection, some P168,891 was not released. As for the Muntinlupa fire victims, the diocese never released any single centavo from the donations.

The Church's Canon Law states that "the intentions of the faithful who give or leave goods to pious causes, once lawfully accepted, are to be most carefully observed, even in the manner of the administration and the expending of the goods."

In layman's terms, donations by parishioners intended for victims should be given to them—no ifs and buts.

It was not only the parishioners' intentions that were not honored. The Vatican's Pontifical Council Cor Unum for Human and Christian also gave a donation of 10,000 euros a few days after Ondoy struck. At that time, the exchange rate was P70 to a euro and the Cor Unum's donations amounted to P697,500. The diocese only released P263,236.50 for the Ondoy victims.

The Cor Unum foundation was established in 1971 by Pope Paul VI. According to the Vatican's website, Cor Unum's mission represents "the care of the Catholic Church for the needy, thereby encouraging human fellowship and making manifest the charity of Christ." Among its objectives is to "assist the Pope and be his instrument for carrying out special initiatives in the field of humanitarian actions when disaster occurs, or in the field of integral human promotion."

Shortly after our report on *Rappler* on the supposed diversion of donated funds came out, the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Giuseppe Pinto, went to the chancery and secured some documents. Mercado's powerful executive secretary reportedly left the chancery in a huff, and returned only when the Nuncio had left, according to a chancery source.

Apparently, the Nuncio had finally ordered Mercado to explain the reported diversion of funds—after ignoring several letters of complaint from priests who bravely identified themselves in the letter. This

was admitted by Mascariñas before the finance forum with priests, with the Nuncio ordering Mercado to reply to the allegations raised in the media.

The diocesan finance council strongly denied the diversion of funds in its reply to the Nuncio. It argued that for the Ondoy calamity, “most donations came as relief goods and were given directly to the victims... . There were so many relief goods that there was no need to release for such purpose.”

As for the money that was not given to the victims, “excess funds were earmarked for credible rehabilitation projects.” But then, the funds were not totally released, and the finance council conveniently blamed “the absence of credible rehabilitation projects.”

By the time the donations started pouring in, the finance council said “the need for it has passed,” thus the money was reclassified for use in future calamities.

As for the Haiti earthquake fund, the finance council said the diocese received a total of P862,514 which had been forwarded to the CBCP in March 2010. Another P168,891 was received in June 2010. This remaining amount “will be forwarded to the Apostolic Nunciature,” the finance council assured, two years after the collections were made.

As for the Muntinlupa fire donation, the finance council admitted no money was released, as “the lay coordinator of the vicariate maintained that they did not need help to handle the emergency.” The collected fund instead will be used for future fire[s] in Muntinlupa.”

The finance council cleared Mercado of any anomaly on the grounds “that the bishop is not directly involved in the handling of funds.”

## SNUBBED

Still, lay leaders were not satisfied with the explanations. They challenged Mercado to open up the books of the diocese, and dared him to participate in a lay forum scheduled on August 27, 2012. They got their reply: a diocesan circular telling parishioners that the lay forum was not approved by Mercado.

Dr. Erwin Carabeo, a lay leader, said the snub showed “the arrogant and dismissive attitude of Mercado toward us lay leaders. We asked him to explain in the spirit of transparency but it appears that is a foreign word to him.”<sup>27</sup>

The huge number of attendees to the forum indicated there was clamor for an explanation from the diocese, Carabeo added. No priests were present at the forum.

With the relationship between the lay and the diocesan higher-ups now strained, lay leaders pinned their hopes on the Vatican. They urged parishioners to demand accountability for their donations and make sure these would be used for the intended purposes.

P a r t T w o

C H A P T E R 9

OPIUM  
OF THE  
HOLY MASSES



**A**BOUT 2,000 YEARS AGO, ENEMIES OF JESUS CHRIST—one gospel described them as Pharisees and another described them as Herodians and “spies” sent by the chief priests—hurled at Him a provocative question. Christ was asked whether the Jews should or should not pay taxes to the Roman authorities. They were hoping to trap him into making a controversial stand and thus give them reason to accuse Christ of treason and hand him over to the Romans.

Christ asked for a Roman coin and inquired whose name was inscribed in it. When they answered that it was Caesar’s, He replied: “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.”

Scholars regard the phrase as Christ’s ultimate description of the separation between the Church and the secular authority. But it could also well apply to the modern Church where some religious authorities withhold what is meant for God.

Corruption among priests—and even among bishops—has become a recurring and embarrassing theme in the Church. This takes various forms, from engaging in lavish lifestyles to stealing Church funds.

While clerics are enjoined to maintain a simple lifestyle as stated in Canon 282 (“clerics are to follow a simple way of life and to avoid anything which smacks of worldliness”), many have succumbed to the trappings of wealth and avarice.

Unlike their foreign counterparts, like in the United States for instance, there is no formal employer-employee setup between the diocese and its priests in the Philippines. However, clerics receive monthly allowances from the diocese they serve. The allowance is not uniform for each diocese—richer dioceses provide higher monthly allowances for their priests.

The allowances are meant as a “decent temporal support for a decent mode of living,” retired Archbishop Oscar Cruz, a Canon law expert, said. “They have a right to sufficient funds to meet their ministerial needs and to comply with their administrative obligations.”<sup>1</sup>

In some of the richer dioceses, priests are covered by Social Security System, Medicare, and Philhealth. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines set up a pension plan for bishops, and diocesan and religious priests for added financial support when they retire.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, priests who are members of religious groups like the Society of Jesus, Dominicans, Franciscans, and so on are taken care of by their religious orders out of a common fund.<sup>3</sup> “Devoting their lives to the particular mission of their order, religious priests take a vow of poverty and relinquish control of material possessions to live in community with other members,” explained Father Brian Doerr, vocations director of the diocese of Lafayette, in the US state of Indiana.

With their needs taken care of by their religious congregation, there is less temptation to acquire wealth beyond their vocation, according to Father Daniel Pilario, a member of the Congregation of Mission, more popularly known as Vincentians. “We are not insecure financially,” Pilario, also the dean of Adamson University’s St. Vincent School of Theology, added.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, this does not mean that clerics from a religious order do not get into trouble, financially speaking. After all, “greed is a consuming vice, and this is an impossible moral accompaniment of any real virtue not only in a Christian faithful—especially so in a cleric,” observed Cruz.<sup>5</sup>

## Jockeying for parishes

In Metro Manila, diocesan or secular priests try to compete with each other, that is, to get parish assignments that are considered “rich.” At least during the time of Cardinal Sin, those who were close to the seat of power got assigned to affluent parishes while those who were considered rebels were either deployed to poorer parishes or given no assignments at all.

Two prime examples were retired Bishop Teodoro Buhain and former Archdiocese of Manila treasurer Monsignor Domingo Cirilos. Although they dipped into the coffers of Manila, they were able to secure “rich” parishes—the Quiapo parish for Buhain and the Paco parish for Cirilos.

Former Manila Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales, who succeeded Sin, did not reinstate Buhain and accepted the latter’s courtesy resignation when Rosales assumed office. As for Cirilos, the retired cardinal had him removed, based on orders from the Vatican.

Apparently, this Church’s feudal system was also practiced by other dioceses in Metro Manila. In the Parañaque diocese, a number of priests complained that those who were perceived to be critical of Bishop Jesse Mercado were given no parishes to oversee or were removed from their parishes and placed on a “floating status.” “Those who appeased the gods got the plum assignments,” one priest remarked.

One Church observer said that such favoritism invited jealousy and suspicion, naturally, since the Church was not really the epitome of transparency. “You’d wonder why they are fighting for prized assignments when they are supposed to be getting the same allowance in that particular diocese. It makes you wonder if it is really a vocation or a profession for some priests.”

Although each diocese and each parish has a finance council that administers funds,<sup>6</sup> these are essentially under the administrative control of the bishop and the parish priest respectively, rendering any check and balance useless. The misappropriation of Church funds by delinquent priests are sometimes committed under the noses of the finance council whose members are beholden to the priest or to the bishop.

## TRAFFICKING IN MASS STIPENDS

One area that is open to abuse by priests (diocesan or religious), in particular, are the Mass stipends. The Canon Law imposes “just penalty” for “trafficking in Mass stipends, along with misuse of social communications, physical abuse or violence against clerics, profanity of sacred objects, unlawful exercise of the Sacred Ministry and other dubious acts committed by priests.”<sup>7</sup>

A just penalty is a clerical punishment which is supposed to be fair, equitable, and appropriate for a given clerical errancy, according to Cruz.<sup>8</sup> The “just penalty” may be in addition to the punitive actions imposed by the Church on its errant members, ranging from censure, to being banned from taking part in Eucharistic celebration, reparation or atonement, dismissal from clerical state, excommunication, and so on.

Under the Canon law, priests may say two Holy Masses during weekdays and a third one during Saturdays, Sundays, and holy days of obligations. A fourth Mass, called quaternate, is strictly prohibited from being celebrated in all circumstances.

In his book, *Guide Documents on Parish, Vicariate, and Diocesan Administrative/Pastoral Concerns*, Cruz explained that a priest could exclusively keep for himself stipends from the first and second Masses (binated). However, for the third Mass (trinated), the priest can only keep one-half of the stipend, with the other half given to the chancery, which is allocated for the poor.<sup>9</sup>

Priests also earn additionally from Masses for special intentions by the faithful. For such Masses, contributions by the faithful may be monetary, but in poorer parishes, these may be gifts or in kind.

The Church is no stranger to potential abuse in Mass stipends, such that the Vatican issued a decree on how many Masses a priest could celebrate each day and on special occasions, and how to handle offerings made by the faithful for special masses.<sup>10, 11</sup>

Rome’s Congregation for the Clergy issued the decree following appeals from bishops for clarification. This arose after the Vatican noted the practice “of those priests who, indiscriminately gathering the offerings of the faithful which are destined for the celebration of Masses according to particular intentions, accumulate them in a single offering and satisfy them with a single Mass.”

The Congregation pointed out that the practice of collective or open Mass was an injustice to the donors of the offerings. It banned such a scheme and insisted that “separate masses are to be applied for the intentions,” keeping in mind the limitations of saying multiple Masses.

“Priests who transgress this grave norm assume the corresponding moral responsibility if they indistinctly collect offerings for the celebration of masses for particular intentions, and combining them in a single offering and, without the knowledge of those who have made the offering, satisfy them in a single Mass,” the decree added.

## NOVALICHES MODEL

Unlike in other richer neighboring dioceses, there were no priests jockeying for coveted parishes in the Novaliches diocese, vicar-general Father Antonio Labiao said in an interview. Bishop Antonio Tobias set up a system that discouraged priests from lobbying for lucrative posts.

Offhand, the scheme appears to indicate that priests cannot be trusted with finances. “But if you will look at it, it encourages transparency and accountability among the priests,” Labiao said.

Among the Metro Manila dioceses, the Novaliches diocese is second only to Manila in terms of land area. “But it is one of the poorest. We only have nine rich parishes,” out of the 64 parishes under the diocese, Labiao said. Still, it is a self-sustaining diocese, thanks to the internal financial reform that Tobias instituted when he assumed office in 2005. The reforms ranged from Mass stipends, allowances, parochial projects, and annual budget preparations.

Before he implemented the financial reforms, Tobias called a presbyteral council, or the council of priests, for a collegial decision. There, they approved the reforms which made the Novaliches diocese sustainable.

To discourage priests from angling for rich dioceses, Tobias standardized the “basic pay” of priests. It does not matter whether one is assigned to a rich or a poor parish, they get the same remuneration. To honor seniority, an additional P300 “longevity” fee is added to the basic pay for every year of service. Thus, a parish priest who has served more years than the others would still get a higher pay.

He also banned priests from holding two positions at the same time, specifically in parishes where there is a parochial school. This has been the practice in many dioceses—the priest is also director of the parochial school and thus receives additional remuneration for it. “This is to prevent priests from angling for parishes with parochial schools. Instead he appointed lay people as school superintendents.

Studying the pattern of income of each parish from 2005 to 2008, Tobias came up with a “socialized taxation,” Labiao said, referring to the remittances of parishes to the diocese. Class A parishes, with P300,000 monthly income or above, are required to remit 35 percent of the amount to the diocese; Class B parishes, with incomes of P150,000 to P299,000, are required to remit 20 percent; while Class C parishes, with a monthly income below P150,000, are only required to remit 12 percent. “So there is no incentive in angling for the richer parishes. You have to remit higher, compared to poorer parishes.”

The income projection also enabled Tobias to determine the annual budget of each parish, lessening opportunity for unscrupulous priests to do some creative accounting. “Parishes already have a template when they present their budget proposal. So there is no added work for them.”

Every November, Tobias meets each parish priest individually for a budget hearing. The bishop clears his schedule for the entire month only for this purpose. “This instills discipline among the priests to be prepared with their budgets,” Tobias explained.

At first, the budget hearings faced resistance from the priests. “They were not used to the system but eventually they saw the wisdom behind it.” Parish priests who failed to submit their financial statements

received personal notes from the bishop, reminding them of their obligation.

To prevent abuse of Mass stipends, the bishop placed a cap: P400 for every Mass said on Sundays, P200 on weekdays, and P400 in weddings. Masses celebrated outside of the diocese are considered part of the limitations imposed on the allowable number of Masses that can be celebrated.

Guest priests get higher stipends, Labiao said, because they are not covered by the SSS and health coverage of the diocese.

To prevent familiarity, which might breed contempt and corruption, Tobias imposed a six-year term limit for a priest's stay in the parish. The rotation of assignment is to allow other priests to experience and expand their constituency.

He also imposed security of tenure for parish staff, allowing continuity in the pastoral programs. "With the bookkeeper and the accountants secure in their position, that provides a check-and-balance mechanism. The priest cannot fool around or threaten to dismiss them," Labiao said.

The internal financial reform is being evaluated every three years to make room for adjustments and improvements. Testimonials from priests, Labiao said, had been positive in enforcing good governance within the diocese.

Thus, when the Novaliches diocese talks about good governance, they know what they are saying. They practice what they preach.

P a r t T h r e e

C H A P T E R 10

FROM  
PROPHETS  
TO  
MODERN-DAY  
PHARISEES

IT WAS THE MOST HEART-WRENCHING SCENE—DEVASTATING yet liberating at once—that one could ever witness in the bishops’ conclave. From their high perch, the princes of the Church were hit with a bolt of lightning sending them to earth with a loud thud. After all, they were not prepared for what had happened.

Just days before their biannual plenary in July 2011, reports surfaced that at least seven bishops received largesse from the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office (PCSO) during the time of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. The largesse came in the form of funds, which the bishops supposedly used to purchase SUVs for their personal and official use.

The bombshell was dropped by PCSO chairwoman Margarita Juico during a congressional probe on the alleged abuse and mismanagement of the gambling agency’s funds during Arroyo’s time.<sup>1</sup>

Immediately, the implications were obvious. Catholic bishops had been reeling from criticisms that they were too cozy with the Arroyo government to the point of playing blind, deaf, and mute to the corruption in the past administration. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines—at least the majority of its members—in a way played a role in saving her fledgling government when it was at its lowest point. The CBCP refused to join calls for her ouster, stopping the juggernaut triggered by the “Hello Garci” scandal in June 2005.<sup>2</sup>

Arroyo was caught in a wiretapped audio recording talking to poll commissioner Virgilio Garcillano at the height of the canvassing of the 2004 presidential results, apparently to make sure she would enjoy a wide lead over a popular rival candidate, actor Fernando Poe Jr. She later confessed her “lapse in judgment,” which was followed by the resignation of 10 of her Cabinet officials and renewed calls for her resignation.

Retired Lingayen-Dagupan Archbishop Oscar Cruz, a critic of Arroyo, did not help in quelling suggestions that the former president lavished his brethren as payment for political debt. “*Iyong mga bigay na iyon ng nakaraang administrasyon ay hindi binigay pagkat malakas ang pananampalataya o kaya dahil talagang maganda ang kalooban. Hindi po. May kakabit po iyang dahilan kung bakit ka bibigyan.* (The previous administration did not do it out of faith or out of generosity. Of course not. It has strings attached to it),” he said.





The fact that the largesse came from the PCSO showed how hypocritical the Churchmen were. The agency operates the lottery, which is a form of gambling.

Not too long ago, the bishops, acting as a collegial body, trumped gambling and all its evils. In their January 23, 2005, statement, the bishops resolved as collective policy:<sup>3</sup>

1. to denounce illegal gambling in all its forms and prevent its legalization;
2. to combat the expansion of organized and systemic legal gambling;
3. to refrain from soliciting or receiving funds from illegal and legal gambling so as not to promote a culture of gambling; and 4. to encourage church personnel and church institutions to refrain from doing the same, even when the objective may be that of helping the poor.

It was a controversy that shook the Church to its core.

At the closed-door plenary, three eyewitnesses related that six of the bishops took turns in explaining themselves to the body.<sup>4</sup> Of the seven involved, only Nueva Segovia Archbishop Ernesto Salgado was not around because he was in the United States at that time. The six were Cotabato Archbishop Quevedo, Zamboanga Archbishop Romulo Valles, Bangued Bishop Leopoldo Jaucian, Isabela Bishop Martin Jumoad, and Bontoc Bishop Rodolfo Beltran.

Some of them explained to their colleagues that they were not even aware that their dioceses were beneficiaries of PCSO funds which were used to buy their service vehicles. Following their confession, one bishop suggested that they pray over their embattled brethren. The six came to the middle of the cavernous hall at the Pope Pius XII Catholic Center in Manila where the plenary was held.

During the prayers, some of the bishops started crying. “Many wept while praying. They were really pained and hurt,” an eyewitness said. “After the prayer, the bishops hugged their troubled colleagues as a sign of solidarity.”

In a written reply to this writer, Quevedo, a former CBCP president, said that the “sensationalized reporting of the news on the ‘Pajero bishops’ ... surely damaged the reputation of the Church.” But he added that the Church was able to regain its moral ascendancy as quickly “as the truth of the vehicle issue fully came out and the disinformation given by the PCSO was revealed,” referring to the Senate hearing the bishops attended.<sup>5</sup>

It was at the plenary that the bishops decided to attend the Senate probe on the PCSO scandal, marking the first time that they were collectively going to the Senate, not to oppose or support any legislation, but to defend themselves.

“The sensationalized reporting of the news on the ‘Pajero bishops’ ... surely damaged the reputation of the Church.”

At the hearing, the bishops brought their PCSO-funded SUVs, ready to return them, while recognizing their lapse of judgment. “We are from the provinces that have some of the most difficult areas that we, as bishops, have to reach. Most of us are from calamity- or conflict-stricken areas. We serve communities with some of the poorest of the poor. Our vocation is to help them, in so far as we can with our resources. When we lack resources, we seek assistance from others,” Quevedo said, reading a prepared statement from the implicated bishops.<sup>6</sup>

To Quevedo, the lesson learned by the bishops is to be “very careful and discerning in dealing with government. The far-reaching final lesson that the CBCP learned is for Bishops [to] no longer ask for help from [the] government for charitable and social services on behalf of the poor and the needy.”

The PCSO scandal marked the lowest point in the Catholic Church’s political image post-EDSA 1, exposing the prelates as Arroyo lackeys whose loyalty could be bought. It was an image they had unwittingly cultivated and nurtured throughout the nine-year Arroyo presidency.

In fact, during her term, the PCSO vehicle scandal was the second controversy that cast doubt on the integrity of the holy men. The first was the envelope scandal wherein a Palace official distributed between P20,000 to P30,000 to the bishops while they were having a plenary also at the Pope Pius XII Catholic Center last July 2006. When this was exposed, Malacañang justified that it was meant to help support the airfare of the bishops.<sup>7</sup>

The timing of the cash gift was suspect. An impeachment attempt against Arroyo was pending in Congress at the time and the bishops were drafting the pastoral statement “Shepherding and Prophecy in Hope” in which they gave their own take on the “burning social issues,” including the impeachment.<sup>8</sup> The opposition sought to remove Arroyo from office for betraying public trust when she allegedly tampered with the votes in the 2004 national polls.

In unequivocal terms, the bishops thumbed down the impeachment complaint against Arroyo, saying the motives of those behind it were dubious. “For unless the process and its rules, as well as the mindset of all participating parties, pro and con, are guided by no other motive than genuine concern for the common good, impeachment will once again serve as an unproductive electoral exercise, dismaying every citizen and deepening the citizen’s negative perception of politicians, left, right, and center,” the pastoral statement said.

## SEPARATION BETWEEN CHURCH AND STATE

With EDSA 1, where Manila Cardinal Jaime Sin played a crucial role, the local Church rediscovered its clout in the nation's political dynamic. With the cutting of ties from Mother Spain and the introduction of the American form of government on our shores, the invisible line separating the state and Church was drawn, with occasional intrusions every now and then.

But according to Canon law expert Oscar Cruz, contrary to general perception, the separation between the Church and state does not refer to the Church's non-intrusion in political affairs, or conversely the government's non-meddling in Church affairs. Simply, it means that the country "shall not adopt or have any official religion."<sup>9</sup>

Such separation, Cruz said, "in its real and practical context ... does not really mean antagonism, much less enmity, but instead presumes collaboration and complementation—ultimately in favor of the people who are both citizens of the State and the Christian faithful of the Church."<sup>10</sup>

In fact, the constitutional separation, according to Cruz, "is good for and beneficial to the Church herself, viz (namely), the Catholic Church proper. It is not hard to imagine what difficulties, compromises and other disorientations the Church could readily suffer in the event that the state would consider her as its established religion. In such a case, it would be the Catholic religion that would lose its sovereignty and socio-spiritual ascendancy with respect to her own faithful constituents."

The same principle also explains why the Church frowns upon, or to put it more accurately, bans clerics from assuming public office "whenever it means sharing in the exercise of civil power."<sup>11</sup> Cruz says, among others, one danger the prohibition seeks to avoid is confusion—whether the priest elected to public office is acting as a man of the cloth or a government functionary.

Perhaps the most important reason is the fact "that the ex-cleric eventually emerges as a big failure in the tenure of the said office." Clerics, he said, "in general not only do not know the art of governance but also have the propensity to pontificate, which is a disaster in the republican democracy."<sup>12</sup>

## PROPHETIC ROLE

It is precisely the Church hierarchy's propensity to pontificate as well as its perceived influence and constant meddling in policymaking and governance which critics loathe. This was highly evident in the contentious reproductive health (RH) bill, where the Church received brick brats from many sectors supposedly for its anti-women and archaic views. The Church insists the RH measure will lead to promiscuity among the youth and to the legalization of abortion.

The next chapter would discuss how the Church was able to derail the full implementation of population planning programs in the past and how it engaged previous administrations that sought to defy the Church. [Chapter 12](#), however, would show a viable partnership between church and state in promoting good governance, away from the minefield of sex and reproduction.

The Church was not always viewed negatively as an institution that meddled in affairs of the state. In fact, the road that led the Church to its prophetic role followed a long and arduous transformation.

The Philippine Catholic Church began to define its prophetic role following the Second Vatican Council, where the Church worldwide sought to redefine its role in the modern world. Alongside Latin American churches, the local Church saw its prophetic role in socio-political and economic realities, inspired by the Latin American liberation theology of preferential option for the poor.

Jesuit priest Antonio Moreno, in his book *Church, State, and Civil Society in Post-Authoritarian Philippines*, noted that some of the changes brought by Vatican II to the local Church “included liturgical reforms, the rise of social action programs, the Church's leadership insertion into the lives of the poor and the burgeoning of lay organizations and movements, particularly the BCCs [or the basic Christian communities].”<sup>13</sup>

“These changes within the church, however, were not uniform since internal contradictions of its teaching and practice affected the outcome of its intervention,” he added. It is in the provincial dioceses that the changes were most felt, particularly the Bacolod and the Malaybalay dioceses, where the Church was in the forefront of the fight for social justice.

The differences of opinion on its prophetic role, Antonio notes, “were quite pronounced during the martial law years.” One was either classified as conservative, moderate, or progressive.

Quoting author Robert Youngblood who wrote a treatise analyzing the political inclinations of the CBCP members then: “The conservatives generally supported martial law and hesitated to involve the church in temporal affairs because of its primarily religious mission. The moderates were critical of government policy that threatened the collective interest of the Church but ambivalent toward martial law. They were influenced by the reforms of Vatican II, but cautious about the Church's political involvement. The progressives were critical of martial law and supportive of groups that struggled for political liberation.”<sup>14</sup>



One of the PCSO vehicles 'donated' to the bishops

The internal division surfaced after martial law was declared. The administrative council of the CBCP (the precursor of the CBCP Permanent Council) in a September 26, 1972 statement, sought for “self-examination” by the public, that is “how far each one is contributing to the evils that beset our country and have given rise to the very issue of martial law.” The statement also expressed satisfaction over Marcos’s assurance “that he was concerned not to prolong martial law unduly. We, too, echo this desire.”<sup>15</sup> Marcos did just the opposite.

But then 17 progressive bishops along with some militant religious groups, issued a separate statement on possible abuses and urged the immediate lifting of martial law.

It was not the last time that the bishops would take opposing opinions about martial law.

The 1976 referendum plebiscite—wherein barangay voters were asked whether Martial Law should continue or not, and wherein proposed amendments replacing the Interim Batasang Pambansa for the regular Batasang Pambansa were put to a vote—also exposed the acute division between the conservatives and the progressives on where the Church should position itself.

Youngblood, in his article, said the conservatives who comprised the majority and led by Cebu Archbishop Julio Cardinal Rosales, advocated participation, while 14 bishops pushed for a boycott. Seventeen bishops wrote a statement titled *Ut omnes unum sint* (That they may be one) demanding that the bishops assert themselves by denouncing the martial law regime. The conservatives, led by Archbishops Antonio Mabutas and Francisco Cruces, retaliated with their own statement, *Et veritas liberabit vos* (And the truth shall set you free) which maintained conservative thinking by advocating cautious collaboration with the Marcos government.

Antonio saw that the internal rift would change and the bishops would arrive at a collective position when Marcos vented his ire against the Church after the CBCP Administrative Council denounced the outcome of the plebiscite as a sham meant only to perpetuate the authoritarian president.

By this time, the irrepressible Manila Cardinal Jaime Sin, who succeeded Rufino Cardinal Santos, a highly apolitical prelate, was beginning to be noticed. In 1977, Sin was elected president of the CBCP, a post he would hold until 1981.

Under Sin, the Church adopted the mantra of “critical collaboration” in dealing with the dictatorship. He called for the abolition of martial law and the resignation of Marcos. With the help of other bishops, Sin pressured Marcos to lift martial law in 1981. The timing was perfect. Writing about the history of the CBCP, Balanga (Bataan) Bishop Ruperto Santos, said Marcos felt obliged to impress the Pope and ease the tension between the church and the state.

Things came to a head in 1986, when in an unprecedented move, the bishops issued a post-election statement condemning the February 1986 snap election as a fraud and declared that Marcos was losing the moral authority to govern.<sup>16</sup>

Archbishop emeritus Cruz recalled that the Vatican exerted pressure on the CBCP not to issue the statement, but this was ignored by the bishops. Bishop Francisco Claver, in an interview with Youngblood, said the Church made history by declaring support “for a revolution before, not after, the fact.” In 1986, Marcos was overthrown in a popular revolt known as “people power.”

## CLOUT AND INFLUENCE

Credited for triggering EDSA 1, Cardinal Sin solidified his role in Philippine politics, a kingmaker in his own right whose armies were the priests, nuns, the religious, lay groups, and, most of all, the majority of the population who were Catholics.

Rightly or wrongly, he became the face of the Church, one whose statements, positions, and opinions were taken to mean the position of the Philippine Church itself.

A heavily indebted and deeply religious President Corazon Aquino made sure she appeased the Church whenever she could—from appointments of Church-endorsed people in government to state policies. She also openly trespassed the separation between the Church and state when she asked for donations for the Church-owned Radio Veritas to repair its damaged transmitters at the height of the EDSA revolution. A devout Catholic, Aquino ran the government under the protective mantle of the Church.

A provinciano who quickly learned the ropes of politics with astuteness and guile, Sin's clout went beyond his anointed one, Corazon Aquino. Even under the presidency of Protestant Fidel Ramos, Sin's shadow hovered heavily in national politics—as well as in policies.

Under Ramos, Sin trained his wrathful eye on Health Secretary Juan Flavio Velasco for his aggressive promotion of contraceptives for population planning and to prevent the spread of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) which causes Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

Sin also led a campaign against Ramos's last-minute move to initiate a change in the Constitution through a people's initiative, which the Church and the prelate believed was meant to allow Ramos to stay on as president.

Following the successful staging of a mammoth protest rally in Luneta in 1997, which drew the likes of Vice President Joseph Estrada, Senator Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, and Corazon Aquino, Ramos abandoned the charter-change initiative.<sup>17</sup>

Sin would again play a major role, this time in Estrada's ouster, calling on the beleaguered president to resign months before EDSA 2 in 2001. He provided refuge to a repentant Ilocos Governor Chavit Singson after he revealed inside stories on Estrada's corruption and claimed he was a target of an assassination attempt.



## TEMPLATE OF CHURCH LEADERS

With his knack for timing and foresight, Sin became the template for other bishops on how to play politics. Alas, Sin was in a league of his own.

Archbishop Cruz, now retired, was apolitical way before he became a political animal. His turning point was when he was president of the CBCP—which thrust him in the limelight. It was during his tenure, from 1996-1999, that the charter-change initiative under Ramos reached its peak. He was also the president during the 1998 national polls which Estrada handily won.

In previous conversations with this journalist, Cruz said his nonpolitical outlook changed when he assumed the CBCP presidency. “The position changes you, redefines you,” he said. He was exposed to political realities, in part due to Sin’s influence. He joined Sin in battling RH and charter change. Later on, he would focus his campaign against the illegal numbers game *jueteng*.

Combative, outspoken, easily accessible, and with a dour sense of humor, Cruz soon caught the attention of politicians as well as the media. *Jueteng* whistle-blowers like Sandra Cam and Wilfredo Mayor sought his protection, no different from what Singson did when he sought succor from Sin. Critics of former President Arroyo regularly consulted with him, according to a source close to the retired prelate.

Before Cruz, previous CBCP presidents, with the exception of Cardinal Sin, were of no political significance. They were primarily shepherds to their own brethren, whose primary duty was to tackle purely Church concerns, dabbling only occasionally in political affairs.

Cruz, however, changed that. Succeeding CBCP presidents—Cotabato Archbishop Orlando Quevedo, Davao Archbishop Fernando Capalla, Jaro Archbishop Angel Lagdameo, Tandag Bishop Nereo Odchimar—all played political roles, but with limited success.

Cruz, however, lacked the charisma of Sin. He also did not have the backing of other bishops, which Sin enjoyed and cultivated by sharing the wealth of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Manila to the poorer dioceses. “Either you hate him or you love him. But most bishops have no love lost for Cruz,” one Church insider observed.<sup>18</sup> Still, Cruz was credited for making the CBCP a political force to reckon with.

With Sin slowly exiting the political scene due to health reasons and his replacement, Gaudencio Cardinal Rosales, shunning involvement in politics, it fell on the CBCP president to fill the void. Some played their political role with savvy; some did not.



## THE MALACAÑANG DIOCESE

Behind every successful man, there is a woman, as the saying goes. But to the men of the Church, this applied in reverse.

To a certain extent, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo owed her presidency to Church leaders. One helped her oust Estrada and pave the way for her presidency. Then a select few managed to help her remain in power when she was losing public support.

To her credit, Arroyo instinctively knew that she had to cultivate close ties with some Church leaders. Father Francis Lucas, executive secretary of CBCP's Episcopal Commission on Social Communication and Mass Media, said Arroyo knew how to charm and please the bishops.<sup>19</sup> "She made it a point to make personal visits to the bishops whenever she was near the area. She tried to help them whenever she could," he said.

Contrary to general perception, only a few dioceses in the Philippines were financially well-off, with most of them in the red, especially in Visayas and Mindanao, Lucas pointed out. "She knew what the bishops needed and she was more than willing to help. She also tried to listen," he said, something which could not be said of previous Presidents Ramos and Estrada.

Arroyo also made it a point to personally meet the bishops whenever they were in Manila for their biannual plenary council, held every January and July. In those meetings, she asked them what they needed and gave them money—purportedly for social services.

Bishops saw this as "goodwill" money, but, to others, it was bribery. In the envelope scandal that broke out in 2006, then CBCP president Angel Lagdameo said he was "inclined to think the president was bribing the bishops so they would change their minds and sentiments about the search for truth."<sup>20</sup>

At the end of their July plenary in 2006, 43 bishops signed a Memorandum of Agreement with Malacañang as beneficiaries of the President's social fund. In this MOA, the dioceses would serve as conduits for the release of affordable medicine, rice, and noodles to their parishes.

This "organized bribery," as one Church insider described it, came in handy when fresh impeachment attempts were lodged against Arroyo that year. In a pastoral statement issued after the plenary, the bishops expressed in unequivocal terms that they did not support the impeachment.<sup>21</sup>

A source who was privy to the deliberations during the plenary said the portion on the impeachment in the pastoral statement originally contained seven paragraphs with "stronger words" but these were trimmed down to only two due to intervention by bishops close to Arroyo. These bishops were collectively known as the "Malacañang diocese" during Arroyo's time because of their unwavering loyalty to her.

One of the more rabid members of the "Malacañang diocese" was retired Tuguegarao Bishop Diosdado Talamayan. While the impeachment part was being deliberated on, Talamayan was always seen on his cellphone and heard giving updates on how the pastoral statement was shaping up.

“As ministers of the Church, it is not our prerogative to support the call for the President’s resignation”

Talamayan also led a group of Northern Luzon bishops who affirmed their faith and trust in Arroyo when new attempts to oust her surfaced following the allegations of corruption in the botched \$321-million national broadband deal. “As ministers of the Church, it is not our prerogative to support the call for the President’s resignation,” the statement said.<sup>22</sup>

In exchange for his loyalty, Arroyo rewarded the former Tuguegarao prelate in more ways than one. In one of their plenary assemblies, Talamayan arrived in a brand-new car, which he told colleagues was a gift from Arroyo. His closeness to the President became more personal. Talamayan was the go-to guy when one wanted to be appointed to the government, including the judiciary. His endorsements to the President were valuable.

He helped lobby for the appointment of Leonardo Leonida as commissioner in the Commission on Elections, although he was eventually bypassed by the Commission on Appointments. Leonida confirmed to this journalist that Talamayan endorsed him.<sup>23</sup>

He was also instrumental in the appointment of Supreme Court Justice Jose Mendoza. Talamayan refused to comment on his alleged lobbying for Mendoza’s appointment.<sup>24</sup>

In 2010, as a national debate raged on whether Arroyo could appoint a chief justice during the election season (which the Constitution prohibits), Talamayan called on members of the Judicial and Bar Council (JBC), which vets nominees to the judiciary, to fast-track the nomination for the replacement of Chief Justice Reynato Puno. He was due to retire less than two months before Arroyo would step down from office. When I wrote about his calls to JBC members, Talamayan felt obliged to write a letter to the CBCP explaining his side. In that letter, Talamayan said he was only expressing his personal opinion and was not speaking on the CBCP’s behalf.

Talamayan retired in June 2011, but his devotion to Arroyo endured beyond his term and that of Arroyo’s. He continued to support her and even acted as her spiritual adviser.<sup>25</sup>

“I hope you will not fail to give me a brand-new car which will serve as your birthday gift to me.”

Another zealous supporter of Arroyo was Butuan Bishop Juan de Dios Pueblos. In October 2007, at the height of the scandal over the junked NBN-ZTE broadband deal, Pueblos led 18 bishops from Mindanao in reiterating their support for Arroyo and opposing calls for her resignation. The statement preceded the Talamayan-led statement which had a similar message.

De Dios Pueblos figured prominently in the PCSO vehicle scandal, after it was revealed that he personally asked Arroyo for a vehicle for his 66th birthday to replace his seven-year-old car.<sup>26</sup> “I really need a brand-new car, possibly a 4-by-4 which I can use to reach the far-flung areas of Caraga [region],”

he wrote in his February 8, 2009, letter to Arroyo. “I hope you will not fail to give me a brand-new car which will serve as your birthday gift to me.” His birthday falls on March 8.<sup>27</sup>

Arroyo referred the request to the PCSO, which funded the purchase of the new sports utility vehicle, worth P1.7 million.<sup>28</sup>

Before this revelation, De Dios Pueblos criticized Senator Benigno Aquino III when he was on the campaign trail, saying the Aquino scion was “not worthy to become president” and “the earlier he will be out of his post, [it] will be better for the Philippines.”<sup>29</sup>

It is believed that the Aquino government allowed PCSO chairwoman Margie Juico to make the damning revelation to get even with De Dios Pueblos. But Juico, in an interview, strongly refuted the suggestion.

Also a reliable ally of Arroyo was Bayombong (Nueva Vizcaya) Bishop Ramon Villena. Arroyo appointed him Regional Development Council chair in Cagayan Valley during her term.

He may not have been involved in the PCSO scandal, but Villena was also a recipient of Arroyo’s generosity. Once, Villena wrote Arroyo to shoulder the hotel accommodation expenses of some Luzon-based bishops in Baguio City when they had a seminar there. Arroyo obliged, tapping funds from the PCSO. The sweepstakes office’s financial support amounted to more than P100,000.

Villena repaid Arroyo’s generosity by supporting her unwaveringly, even when she was already out of power. In one instance, he backed a Christmas reprieve for Arroyo who was held under hospital arrest for an election-sabotage case.

Other members of the “Malacañang diocese” were former CBCP presidents Ferdinand Capalla of Davao and Nereo Odchimar of Tandag. When Congress, acting as the National Board of Canvassers, was in the thick of counting the results of the 2004 national race, Capalla issued a statement declaring the conduct of the polls as “generally peaceful” and ruled out a “national conspiracy to engage in massive cheating.” At that time, opposition members were claiming that Arroyo had rigged the elections.

The statement doused the growing public perception that Arroyo’s main rival, actor Fernando Poe Jr., was cheated of the presidency.

“The personal responses of the bishops to my questionnaire also show that there were some instances of cheating and violations of election laws by political parties in their areas but these did not affect the voting in general. There were a few exceptions, of course,” Capalla said. If there were reports of cheating locally or regionally, the bishops concluded that there was no “national conspiracy to engage in massive cheating.”<sup>30</sup>

Odchimar, for his part, was a last-minute replacement for former CBCP vice president Antonio Ledesma, the archbishop of Cagayan de Oro. His election as vice president in 2007, with the backing of Mindanao bishops, broke the tradition of re-electing first-termers for a second term. The casualty in this internal politics within the CBCP was Ledesma, who was a vocal anti-Arroyo critic. Had Ledesma been elected vice president for a second term, he would have been the natural choice to be the next CBCP president.

Odchimar would eventually be elected CBCP president in 2009, which followed tradition this time.

Prior to his election as head, he was invited to the Palace for a meeting with Arroyo, brokered by then Pampanga Representative and First Son Mikey Arroyo. De Dios Pueblos accompanied Odchimar to the Palace.<sup>31</sup>

These members of the “Malacañang diocese” served as Arroyo’s point persons in crucial plenary assemblies of the CBCP. They also tempered any critical pastoral statements issued by the bishops on social and political issues. The February 26, 2008 pastoral statement titled “Seeking Truth, Restoring Integrity,” which followed a hastily called plenary council, was a prime example.<sup>32</sup>

In that assembly, which came just two months since their first biannual meeting in January, the bishops felt obliged to tackle the issue of mounting allegations of corruption in the Arroyo administration which led to renewed calls for her to resign. The fresh calls were triggered by the refusal of then Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Romulo Neri to testify in the Senate’s inquiry on the national broadband deal, with First Gentleman Mike Arroyo having been dragged into the scandal. Neri invoked the executive privilege when asked about his conversations with the president regarding the project.

Critics said Neri’s refusal was part of the pattern of cover-ups which had marked her administration and that she had lost the moral ascendancy to govern.

In our interviews with sources privy to the deliberations, the bishops were faced with three major issues: 1) whether a pastoral statement was in order; 2) how to approach allegations that the government was covering up allegations of corruption; and 3) whether they should pass judgment on her authority based on moral grounds.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, after a 10-hour deliberation, the longest in recent memory, the bishops stopped short of asking for her resignation and refused to pass judgment on whether she had lost her moral ascendancy. Malolos Bishop Jose Oliveros, in our interview, said the “consensus” of the majority of the bishops was that the allegations of graft and corruption against Arroyo were not backed by evidence.

Bishops from Mindanao, who were sympathetic to Arroyo, watered down the draft pastoral statement with their interventions. For instance, the draft pastoral statement initially said Arroyo’s moral ascendancy was “at stake”, but this was revised, stating that “questions [were being raised] about the moral ascendancy of the present government.”

## REDEFINING CHURCH-STATE ENGAGEMENT

What has the Church learned from playing with political fire and being in bed with political players?

There was a time when people clamored for greater Church participation, or intrusion to some, in the political arena. The period during the Marcos dictatorship was a testament to this: Church leaders were seen as prophets, whose role was to stand up for people abused and manipulated by an authoritarian regime.

In this restrictive environment, Church leaders assumed the role of saviors, serving as the people's voice which would have otherwise been muted. This was not unique to the Philippines. The experience in Latin America and in other former Communist countries in Europe, such as Poland, attest to this.

During the Marcos regime, local dioceses like Malaybalay and Bacolod played significant roles in empowering citizens. Widespread poverty, social inequity, and injustice ensured fertile ground for an activist Church in the two dioceses. In a way, they served as a spark for greater public participation in sociopolitical, cultural, and economic spheres, and in denouncing repression and social injustice.

Church officials we interviewed said Church intrusion into politics had been greatly misunderstood. "The Church does not cease to be Filipino. We are first and foremost Filipinos," said retired Tuguegarao Archbishop Diosdado Talamayan. For Manila Auxiliary Bishop Broderick Pabillo, Church involvement in politics is a necessary ingredient for change. "We see ourselves as [a] catalyst, to use our influence for the good of the people, especially the marginalized."

In his book, Moreno illustrated how Malaybalay Bishop Francisco Claver and his successor, Bishop Gaudencio Rosales, along with Bacolod Bishop Antonio Fortich, championed people's rights and galvanized citizens while treading the thin line between their spiritual and political roles.

In the Malaybalay diocese, the local Church assumed the role of activist. "Five variables factored in[to] this development: 1) the Vatican II renewal; 2) the authoritarian context; 3) the emergence of lay participation; 4) a young local Church; and 5) the rise of small Christian communities (also known as basic ecclesial communities or BECs)," Moreno said.

The BECs in a way, acted as the Church's ear to the prevailing sentiment on the ground. It also acted as the people's forum to seek redress and air their grievances.

Claver pushed for "active lay participation in the life of the Church based on 3 principles: 1) involvement; 2) dialogue; and 3) co-responsibility. Mechanisms of consultation were set in place so that participation and constant intercommunication were mainstreamed in the life of the Church. These meetings have had a way of institutionalizing interaction and consultation. Lay people were expected to deliberate and forge a unified consensus in decision-making," Moreno said.

The seeds that Claver planted were still evident even after the fall of the Marcos regime, with healthy civil society participation on issues affecting the people of Bukidnon. When he resigned in 1984, his successor, Rosales, followed in Claver's footsteps in terms of encouraging lay participation, formation of Basic Christian Communities, and responsiveness to social justice issues. (Claver died in July 2010 at the

age of 81. His last assignment was in Bontoc-Lagawe, where he was vicar apostolic.)<sup>34</sup>

It was during Rosales's tenure there that environmental issues cropped up in Bukidnon, from illegal logging to deforestation. Protest rallies were organized, dialogues with local and national leaders were initiated, and the pulpits were used to warn against the evils of illegal and commercial logging.

At one point, Rosales sent a letter to then President Corazon Aquino to stop logging in the province or else "our people will go out to the streets soon." Rosales also called on the people to get ready for mass action if a total log ban was not imposed in the province. Led by the Church, non-governmental groups, people's organizations, and civil-society organizations joined hands in making Bukidnon the first province in the country to be declared completely logging-free.

The Malaybalay diocese did not only serve as a catalyst for environmental advocacy in Bukidnon. It also served as a template in pursuing agrarian collective rights. The MAPALAD case—Mapadayonong Panaghiusa sa Lumad Alang sa Damlag (Progressive Unity of Natives for the Future)—involving land ownership was a case in point.

In this protracted battle for land ownership which reached the High Court, Rosales, who was already Cardinal of Manila, was able to broker an arrangement that allowed for an amicable solution.<sup>35</sup> Here, it was the farmers' groups that were in the forefront, with Church leaders like Rosales providing the backbone.

In Bacolod, where the divide between the rich and the poor was clearly visible, Fortich served as the voice of peace between two warring ideologies. A hotbed of insurgency and thus militarization in the process, the Church was caught in a crossfire. Fortich was responsible for inspiring the notion of "zones of peace" as neutral grounds to further prevent collateral damage between the military and leftist groups.

This was not initially welcomed by the warring sides but Fortich persisted and inspired other bishops to replicate his example in provinces plagued by armed conflicts. (Fortich died in July 2004, a month before he turned 90).<sup>36</sup>

With the help of civil-society groups and people's organizations, a Peace Caravan was initiated by the Bacolod diocese, drawing support from groups and individuals spanning different ideologies. It led to the declaration of the war-torn Sitio Cantomanyog in Candoni town in Southern Negros as one of the first peace zones in the Philippines.<sup>37</sup>

In both the above examples, the respective Church leaders played active roles without losing their perspective—acting as conduits for political and policy change with the people's interests as their anchor. They were neither beholden to any political leaders nor were they biased for any ideological camp, except the Church's preferential option for the poor, acting only as catalyst for an engaged citizenry.

Today, there are still princes of the Church in the mold of Fortich, Rosales, and Claver. One example is Palawan Bishop Pedro Arigo, whose anti-mining stance helped consolidate the objections of stakeholders against the entry of the mining industry there. Puerto Princesa Mayor Edward Hagedorn said the city government and Arigo enjoyed a collaborative relationship against mining, setting aside other issues on which they disagreed.

Arigo's model in Palawan drew the admiration of Lipa Archbishop Ramon Arguelles, saying the Church in Lipa hoped to replicate Arigo's example. "We're studying how Bishop Arigo was able to

gather all stakeholders against mining. We're trying to copy his success in Palawan.”

Present bishops and emerging Church leaders could learn a thing or two from their predecessors.

P a r t T h r e e

C H A P T E R 11

THE BATTLE  
OVER OVARIES



**D**URING THE JULY 2007 PLENARY ASSEMBLY OF THE CATHOLIC Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, the floor was opened for nominations of the new set of officers that would hold office for two years. It was supposed to be a routine election. Two years earlier, the CBCP elected new leaders to replace the old batch who had already served the maximum tenure of two terms, or a total of four years.

In the 2005 election, Jaro Archbishop Angel Lagdameo was elected president with Cagayan de Oro Archbishop Antonio Ledesma as vice president. It was only their first term, so it was expected that they would retain their posts, as was the tradition among the brotherhood of bishops.

Expectedly, Lagdameo was re-elected as president. When the nomination for the vice president came next, one bishop rose and nominated Tandag Bishop Nereo Odchimar to contest the heavyweight Ledesma for the post. Odchimar, who was appointed bishop in 2001, was nowhere in the Church's radar of influence.

And then the unthinkable happened. A few were surprised, but most of the bishops were part of the charade.

When the votes were counted, Ledesma lost to the relatively unknown Odchimar. It was not only the CBCP vice presidency that Ledesma lost. He was also deprived of the chance to succeed Lagdameo. (The vice president normally succeeds the president after serving his two terms.) He was next in line to the CBCP's helm, the most influential Church post after the archbishop of Manila.

Odchimar, according to a source who participated in the voting, was the runaway favorite from the initial to the final count.<sup>1</sup> He was the first bishop to become CBCP president. His predecessors were either cardinals or archbishops.

It was a successful coup.

What caused Ledesma's ouster? It was his position on reproductive health: He advocated collaboration with the government in promoting natural family planning methods. Known as one of the more progressive bishops, Ledesma brought with him the idea of "principled collaboration" with the government when he was appointed archbishop of Cagayan de Oro in 2006.<sup>2</sup>

When we asked him if his position on reproductive health triggered the coup, Ledesma did not dismiss the suggestion. "That's possible," he said.<sup>3</sup> Events leading to the CBCP election in 2007 support this.

Ledesma has always been a believer in the Standard Days Method (SDM), a calendar-based method of family planning based on a woman's fertility cycle. Archbishop Paciano Aniceto, who chaired the CBCP Commission on Family Life for years, said SDM was among the five birth-spacing methods approved by the Church.<sup>4</sup> The five methods are:

1. Billings ovulation
2. The basal temperature
3. The lactational amenorrhea method
4. The sympto-thermal method

## 5. The SDM

Of these natural family planning (NFP) methods, it was the SDM that had been eyed with suspicion by some Church leaders that it was even put to a vote by the CBCP.

In an article Ledesma wrote for *Impact Magazine* in 2003,<sup>5</sup> he gave a peek into what happened during the CBCP plenary. That year, he said, the CBCP conducted two consensus votes on family planning.

“The first vote was a ‘no’ to collaboration with the government’s total family planning program. The second vote, however, was a ‘yes’ to the diocese’s use of the SDM in its own natural family planning program—without any contraceptive component and without collaboration with government.

The first vote maintained the Church’s critical stance against the government’s population program, which was still perceived to be dictated by a contraceptive mentality. This apprehension among bishops persisted even if the present administration of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, a devout Catholic, had earlier indicated its preference for natural family planning methods.

Indeed, this preference for the NFP methods by [the] government was heightened by the introduction of a new and simpler NFP method, called the Standard Days Method. Ironically, however, objections to SDM came not from government quarters but from several church-related groups, particularly those who were promoting the earlier-recognized NFP methods such as the basal body temperature method (BBT), the billings ovulation method (BOM), and the symptom-thermal method (STM).

For them, SDM was suspect because it was being promoted by [the] government, presumably with some backup contraceptive methods; the research for SDM was funded by USAID [United States Agency for International Development]; the method was not yet fully tested; and it was nothing more than the old calendar-rhythm method that had already been discredited as unreliable. Moreover, SDM could not be considered as NFP because it did not involve the daily examination of bodily signs and symptoms.

This, then, is the significance of the second vote at the CBCP assembly. Notwithstanding these objections, the bishops as a body recognized SDM in itself as a natural family planning method. Provided it is not mixed with contraceptives, is not seen as a government program with its cafeteria approach, and is accompanied with the proper value formation to avoid a contraceptive mentality, the bishops did not voice any objections to the inclusion of SDM in the local Church’s program for natural family planning. Indeed, since the CBCP has distanced itself from the government’s NFP program, all the more should the local church promote its own comprehensive NFP program that includes SDM.”

The 2003 plenary vote was not the end of the issue over the SDM. In an effort to find a middle ground for government-Church engagement on the promotion of natural family planning, particularly the standard days method, Ledesma acted as bridge between the CBCP and the Arroyo government. He was backed by his own experience.

In the diocese of Cagayan de Oro, the collaboration between Ledesma and the Population Commission (PopCom) was so strong that a member of the PopCom council even came from the religious. Cagayan de Oro PopCom administrative officer Edna Ramos told us that they were teaching NFP methods even in churches. “We have a good working relationship with the diocese,” she said.<sup>6</sup>

Brokered by Ledesma, then Health Secretary Francisco Duque III and PopCom executive director Tomas Osias met with CBCP officials twice in 2006 to seek Church participation in the Responsible Parenting Movement of the government, which would promote NFP.

Purists within the Catholic Church did not like what they were seeing.

The Family and Life Apostolate in Mindanao, prodded by some conservative bishops, reported Ledesma’s collaboration with PopCom to the Vatican.<sup>7</sup>

Father Melvin Castro, chairman of the CBCP Episcopal Commission on Family and Life, told this journalist that in the promotion of SDM, “artificial methods are being introduced as a backup plan in case [SDM] fails.” Confirming the differing positions on NFP and SDM promotion, Castro said: “While we love Archbishop Ledesma and respect him, he has a different position when it comes to reproductive health.”<sup>8</sup>

Ledesma countered by arguing that SDM was scientifically proven and approved by the Church. He also maintained that SDM was being introduced exclusively and not in combination with artificial birth-control methods.

The bishop challenged his critics to consider three options: 1) to continue to criticize and remain suspicious of government; 2) to work separately from the government on NFP promotion; or 3) to critically collaborate with the government.

“We have actually tried the first two approaches—with minimal results. Trying out the third approach may incur some risk of failure and misuse, but perhaps the greater risk is not to try at all,” he said.

But the conservatives and the suspicious were not to be placated. In July 2009, after only one term in office, Odchimar indicated that he was no longer interested in seeking a second term, citing poor health.<sup>9</sup>

The coup on Ledesma showed, to a certain extent, how the conservatives within the Catholic Church would do anything to control the ovaries of women. Together with the legalization of same-sex marriages and divorce, this was one of three in the “axis of evil” that the Church had been hell-bent on stopping.

The passage of the reproductive health bill (RH) was the singular issue that preoccupied the Church in the first three years of President Benigno Aquino’s administration. The bishops drew the line between them and Malacañang, like Moses parting the Red Sea.

Never before had the Church taken a hard-line 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.

Possibly, the RH divide was the only issue that isolated the Church from the Catholic majority, which observers quickly pointed out was one indication of the declining clout and influence of the Church. In a rebuke to the Church, a high 82 percent of Filipinos surveyed by the Social Weather Stations in 2011 agreed that family planning was a matter of “personal choice of couples and no one should interfere with

it.” Seventy-three percent said “if a couple wants to plan a family, [they] should be able to get information from the government on all legal methods.”<sup>10</sup>

Expectedly, Church leaders downplayed the results of such surveys. Lipa Archbishop Ramon Arguelles perhaps summed up the general sentiment of other bishops on the results of the survey: “They can be manipulated.”<sup>11</sup>

The bishop said people in the provinces would prefer larger families, contrary to the intention of the RH movement. “We deal with the people, that’s why we know the real pulse of the people,” he said.

But in its own survey on Filipino families released in 2003, the CBCP found that only four in 10 of those surveyed said the use of contraceptives was unjustifiable. The survey covered the heads of families nationwide, with a sample size of 1,268 respondents.<sup>12</sup>

When President Aquino reiterated his stance on the RH Bill in his 2012 State of the Nation Address, Church leaders viewed it as an open declaration of war.<sup>13</sup> “Aquino declared an open war, a head-on collision against us and against the Catholic Church,” Arguelles said.

Sorsogon Bishop Arturo Bastes and Malolos Bishop Jose Oliveros chimed in, saying the President’s move undermined the moral authority of the Church and turned a deaf ear to the majority of Filipinos.

It was as if there were two parallel universes—one was where the surveys reflected reality and the other was where whatever the self-appointed moral guardians said was the reality.



*Priests join rally vs RH*

It was not always this way. The Catholic Church, to which about eight out of 10 Filipinos belong, has always enjoyed political clout and influence to the point of dictating public policies. Before RH came to the fore, whatever the Church wanted, it got, primarily in helping oust two presidents.

## THE CONSTITUTION ACCORDING TO THE GOSPEL

Swept into power in 1986 with the help of the religious, Mrs. Aquino was a dutiful handmaiden of the Church. To show her debt of gratitude, she allowed the princes of the Church to dictate on government policies, including on reproductive rights and women's health.

In her foreword to the book written by medical doctor Marilen Dañguilan, *Making Choices in Good Faith*, Ana Maria Nemenzo disclosed snippets of how the Church sought to draft the 1987 Constitution according to its own Gospel.

Nemenzo said the Church, backed by pro-life groups, proposed the inclusion of the phrase “the right to life of the fertilized ovum,” which women's groups opposed. The issues raised at that time still reverberate to this day.

“In the petition, we argued that ‘the right to life of the fertilized ovum’ be excluded on the following grounds:

1. There was no sufficient time to consult the women throughout the country on an issue that has been stifled in a traditionally hostile environment.
2. There were sufficient laws penalizing abortion in this country.
3. Support programs for women were not yet in place such as child-care facilities, and health and family planning services.
4. The proposed provision was tantamount to class discrimination since the majority of women lacked education, resources, and access to health services.<sup>14</sup>

In the end, they settled for the phrase that provided equal protection to “the life of the mother and the life of the unborn from conception.” Nemenzo said the phrase “the mother” was “a concession to the women's lobby.”

But then, “no sooner had the ink dried on the final draft of the Constitution when the Catholic Church and ‘pro-life’ groups drafted an executive order for President Aquino ... [which] would have prohibited in effect the use of government resources for contraceptive methods other than natural family planning, the only method endorsed by the Church.” The draft executive order was set aside with the timely intervention of women's groups.

Among the casualties in the Church intrusion into population policy was UP professor Solita Monsod, who chaired the National Economic Development Authority at that time. In the medium-term Philippine Development Plan (1987-1992) as prepared by NEDA, it targeted zero population growth by 2010. (As of 2012, NEDA director general Arsenio Balisacan said the Philippines had a population growth rate of 1.98 percent.)<sup>15</sup> The Church lost no time in pouncing on Monsod.

Bishop Jesus Varela, who was then the CBCP head of the Ecumenical Commission on Family Life, tied Monsod's development plan to Marcos's population planning program, and said foreign funding institutions were behind the move. (In the latest RH controversy in 2012, the Church sang the same tune,

accusing President Benigno Aquino III of catering to the demands of foreign agencies in pushing the controversial measure.)

Under attack by the Church and having policy differences with other Cabinet officials, Monsod quit NEDA and was replaced by Jesus Estanislao, a technocrat who had ties with Church leaders. Estanislao was a known member of the Opus Dei. Monsod ran for senator in 2001 but lost.



## CROSSING SWORDS WITH THE CHURCH

The most recent RH controversy was not the first time that the Catholic Church locked horns with the government on the issue of reproductive rights and population management. As early as 1973, the CBCP issued a pastoral letter “on the population and family life” where they deplored the contraceptive mentality as “the principal solution to the population problem.” This came after the Department of Justice gave clearance to contraceptive sterilization.<sup>16</sup>

The CBCP reiterated its concern on population in another pastoral letter issued in 1977 where they expressed concern over the “anti-natalist programs [being] openly promoted with the concerted use of government resources.” They deplored the “coercive measures—violating consciences, and even destroying [the] innocence of children under the guise of sexual education.”<sup>17</sup>

In 1979, in time for the UN declaration that year as the International Year of the Child, the Church attacked the supposed systematic abortion in clinics and hospitals all over the country, describing them as “slaughterhouses of unborn children.” The bishops lamented that “public authorities have accepted the inclusion of abortion in the training of public health officials, have permitted the entry of sophisticated instruments of abortion into the country, continue the spread of abortifacient IUDs and encourage the promotion of abortifacient injectables.”<sup>18</sup>

In July 1990, the CBCP issued a list of guiding principles on population control “for the guidance of the Catholic faithful.<sup>19</sup> The bishops followed this up with a pastoral letter months later that was read in pulpits all over the country, assailing Corazon Aquino’s government’s attempt to revive the population program, and the renewed efforts of local and foreign non-government organizations “to manipulate family size by promoting values that are incompatible with Christian living, and by distributing drugs and devices that artificially prevent conception of and even abort human life already conceived in the womb.”<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps because of these pastoral letters, and more probably because of strong lobbying by the Church, population control programs during Mrs. Aquino’s administration failed to take off. Besides, Aquino was a loyal daughter of the Church and it was unthinkable that she would want to rankle her holy benefactors.

But her successor, Fidel Ramos, was determined to change all that.

Ramos, a Protestant, appointed the ebullient Dr. Juan Flavio, also a Protestant, as his health secretary. The charming Flavio proved to be a media darling, and his matter-of-fact approach to population programs was a game changer. Flavio quickly captured the imagination of the common man and won the admiration of the public with his self-deprecating humor, and streetwise approach to health issues. His statements were funny, witty, and honest at the same time, which made for quotable quotes in the news.

Under the slogan “Let’s DOH It!” Flavio singlehandedly fired up the sleepy Department of Health, bringing health issues from the national to local level. Among his major achievements was the polio eradication campaign, which earned plaudits from the World Health Organization.



*Nuns rallying vs RH*

Early in his term, Flavier served notice that he would be serious in combating the spread of AIDS which had started to rear its ugly head. He anchored his campaign on three letters: ABC, which stood for Abstinence, Be Faithful, and Condoms.

Expectedly, the Church took issue with the third component of his anti-HIV/AIDS campaign, and found itself flexing its muscle against the diminutive health secretary. Led by Manila Archbishop Cardinal Jaime Sin, bishops and priests used pulpits to denounce him. Prayer rallies were organized as well.

In one prayer rally, Sin unkindly labeled Flavier as an “agent of Satan” and one who deserved to drown in the sea. In press conferences and private conversations with Flavier, Sin would sometimes fail to mask his hurt feelings.

Entering an area where even angels feared to tread, Flavier became so popular that he was once considered by Ramos to be presidential material. He enjoyed high popularity ratings and was among the best-liked Cabinet officials. He was named Filipino of the Year in 1994 by the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*.<sup>21</sup>

When the 1995 midterm race beckoned, Flavier was on Ramos’s top list for the ruling Lakas-NUCD’s senatorial ticket. It was an opportunity for the Church to unleash its might against Flavier and take revenge. Apart from Marcos, Flavier could be the only political candidate that the Church indirectly campaigned against.

While the country is predominantly Catholic, the fact is that it does not command a solid Catholic vote, a situation that even the hierarchy recognizes.<sup>22</sup> It does not engage in bloc voting, a phenomenon identified with the Iglesia ni Cristo. But while there may be no Catholic vote, the Church’s moral suasion cannot be ignored.

In the run-up to the 1995 senatorial race, Flavier was ranking in the surveys, next to Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who was entering the political arena for the first time.<sup>23</sup> But behind the scenes, the Catholic Church mobilized its lay groups to campaign against Flavier, particularly the Couples for Christ, the Council of the Laity of the Philippines, and other church-based groups. The campaign worked.

Senator Miriam Defensor-Santiago, who placed sixth behind Flavier in the 1995 senatorial race,<sup>24</sup> was apparently in the know about the Church’s not-so-discreet campaign against Flavier.



“In the time of Health Secretary Juan Flavier, he just started distributing condoms for free without any legal basis. The Catholic Church campaigned against him but he won as senator anyway,” Santiago said in 2012 as she advised senators seeking re-election not to be afraid of a possible backlash from Catholic voters.<sup>25</sup> Santiago gave this advice as the Senate was debating the merits of the Reproductive Health Bill.

Flavier won, but landed way below expectations in the final count. An SWS survey on May 8, 1995, the day of the elections, showed Flavier sliding to the third and fourth spot.<sup>26</sup> He wound up fifth in the final count, behind Arroyo, Raul Roco, Ramon Magsaysay, and Franklin Drilon. (In the 2001 senatorial race where Flavier sought a second term and without the active negative campaigning of Church groups, he placed second, behind Noli De Castro, with 11.7 million votes.)<sup>27</sup>

As a legislator, Flavier did not forget what the Church had done. He had barely warmed his seat when he proposed the idea of taxing the Churches. He also sought an investigation into the collapse of the previously Church-owned Monte de Piedad Savings Bank.

“In the time of Health Secretary Juan Flavier, he just started distributing condoms for free without any legal basis. The Catholic Church campaigned against him but he won as senator anyway.”

It was not only Flavier that the Church had in its crosshairs. It threw its weight against the charter-change initiative of Ramos when his term was about to end. With the public against any charter-change initiative at that time, the Church had the upper hand.

## POPULATION PROGRAM REWIND

The country's 13th president, Joseph Estrada, avoided a clash with the Catholic Church on the population issue with his ambivalent policy. However, Estrada's health secretary, Alberto Romualdez, said that before he was ousted in 2001, the President was ready to purchase P70 million worth of contraceptives. The signing of the contract was overtaken by the EDSA 2 "revolution."<sup>28</sup>

Estrada slowly lost the support of the Church when he pushed for an "all-out war" against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. He rejected the call of the CBCP and Sin for a cessation of hostilities in Mindanao.<sup>29</sup> It did not also help that it was during his abbreviated term that the first lethal injection was carried out since the death penalty was reimposed in 1993.<sup>30</sup> The Church had opposed the reimposition of the death penalty.

Thus, when charges of graft and corruption started shaking the Estrada presidency, the Church, led by Sin, added its voice to clamors for his ouster. The rest is history.

Church officials quickly embraced Arroyo, a devout Catholic like Corazon Aquino. Arroyo put the population control program in the back burner, despite her admission that she used pills as a young mother.<sup>31</sup>

Refusing to antagonize the Church, Arroyo perhaps—the most photographed President in the act of receiving communion—aggressively promoted only the natural family planning method. Her health secretary, Manuel Dayrit, refused to touch the money allocated by Congress to finance or purchase artificial contraceptives, and instead engaged Church-based groups to promote NFP.<sup>32</sup> "We are not buying," Dayrit told the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism when asked about a P180-million budget inserted by Albay Representative Edcel Lagman for contraceptives in 2007. Instead, the Arroyo government would just "strengthen the scientific, natural family planning methods."

Apart from promoting only NFP, Arroyo further endeared herself to the Church by revoking the death penalty.<sup>33</sup> It was a charm offensive that worked. "She was a loyal daughter of the Church," said Arguelles in an interview. "For all her faults and despite what they say against her, she listens to her conscience."<sup>34</sup>

Thus, it was no surprise that majority of the bishops stood with her in her hour of greatest need. At the height of the moves to oust her following the "Hello, Garci" scandal, the CBCP tilted the balance of power in her favor by stopping short of calling for her removal.<sup>35</sup> Arroyo survived and was able to finish her term.

## INTERNAL POLITICS WITHIN THE CHURCH

On the other hand, Arroyo's promotion of the NFP inadvertently exposed a lingering disagreement within the Church on active collaboration with the government in promoting family planning, as well as the politics that the bishops played.

Cagayan de Oro Archbishop Antonio Ledesma was one of the few bishops who practiced what they preached. When he was bishop of Ipil in Zamboanga del Sur, Ledesma engaged government population agencies in a "principled collaboration" for the active promotion of NFP.<sup>36</sup>

An assessment on the Church engagement with the government on promoting NFP showed that the campaign was successful as value formation was integrated in the program. It was not only a means to control the size of the family or space their pregnancies.

"The answers of the survey respondents and the FGD [focus group discussion] participants showed value formation is integral to the program. This encompasses fertility awareness and following the pastoral guidelines. The value of having children and the pro-life teaching were also both underscored in the FGDs. Among the Catholic believers, this "mattered" since they no longer feel that "guilt feeling" of not following the teachings of the Church. This is an area where both belief and practice matched," the assessment noted.<sup>37</sup>

But the campaign was not without hitches. Rumors spread that there was huge funding for the campaign and that some in the Church and government were profiting. There was also an issue that the NFP methods promoted by the Ipil Prelature encouraged "backup methods," the report said, referring to the side-by-side promotion of artificial birth control methods in case the NFP method failed.<sup>38</sup>

## BREAKING TRADITION

If some bishops had no qualms about ostracizing one of their own over basic differences on family planning, what more could we expect from those who subscribe to the opposite view?

“I don’t care if the Catholic Church will abandon me because of my support for the reproductive health bill. I cannot allow a Church-run state”

Even before Benigno Aquino III ran for president, bishops cast a wary eye on him, primarily because of his strong stance on reproductive health. In October 2009, he was quoted in Cebu City as saying: “I don’t care if the Catholic Church will abandon me because of my support for the reproductive health bill. I cannot allow a Church-run state. The Church teaches me that I will follow my conscience. My conscience tells me that we have an overpopulation problem. I have to address it; we need to control the population. We must ensure full availability of contraceptives.”

But in the run-up to the 2010 elections, Aquino was more conciliatory. He distanced himself from the pending RH bill and used the term “responsible parenthood,” which was acceptable to the Church.<sup>39</sup>

The bishops’ distrust of Aquino, however, had been firmly implanted. In fact, some of them went all out in expressing support for minor presidential candidate John Carlos “JC” Delos Reyes of *Ang Kapatiran* (Brotherhood). The party’s platform of government hewed closely to the teachings of the Catholic Church, including on reproductive health. Ignoring the 2005 admonition of Papal Nuncio Antonio Franco for bishops to stop meddling in politics,<sup>40</sup> six bishops openly endorsed Delos Reyes for the presidency, saying he represented the “conscience vote for 2010.” The six were Lipa Archbishop Ramon Arguelles, Novaliches Bishop Antonio Tobias, Ilagan Bishop Joseph Nacua, San Jose de Mindoro Bishop Antonio Palang, Bacolod Bishop Vicente Navarra, and resigned Novaliches Bishop Teodoro Bacani.<sup>41</sup>

Two of them—Navarra and Arguelles—actually resigned as chair of the Church-based Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting because of their open declaration of support for Reyes. (Bishops serve as chair of the PPRCV in the diocesan level.)<sup>42</sup>

In yet more proof that there is no such thing as a “Catholic” vote, the bishops’ endorsement failed to have any effect on delos Reyes’s campaign, which was doomed from the start. He placed eighth and last in the 2010 presidential race, getting only 44, 244 votes or 0.12 percent of the valid votes cast. Another unknown, Nicolas Perlas, fared better, getting 54,575 votes.<sup>43</sup>

## FAILED DIALOGUES

Swept into power with a huge mandate, President Benigno Aquino wasted no time in pushing for a reproductive health bill aimed at curbing the population and bringing health services to women. The RH bill was first filed in 1998 and was always blocked by the Church. The measure never reached the plenary due to strong lobbying by the Church against its passage, even during President Ramos's time. However, Ramos took a different tack, with Flavio as his one-man juggernaut in promoting condoms and pills.

In March 2010, or a few months before the national elections, the bishops issued a warning on the "revitalized promotion of condoms." They called for a ban on condom advertisements in mass media, adding that the campaign was backed by a multimillion-dollar industry.<sup>44</sup>

At the time, with Arroyo already on the way out, population control advocates seized the opportunity to revive population control measures.

On January 30, 2011, the CBCP issued a strongly worded statement against the RH Bill, saying the bill in all its versions, "calls us to make a moral choice: to choose life or to choose death."<sup>45</sup> At that time, the government and the CBCP were engaged in a dialogue with Malacañang over the RH bill.

The dialogue, however, was bound to fail. Twice, the CBCP backed out of the negotiating table after the bishops accused Aquino of negotiating in bad faith.

They cried betrayal, referring to the president's public announcements that he was bent on pushing the RH bill while the bishops were still trying to negotiate with him on the legislation's contentious points.

Lipa Archbishop Ramon Arguelles said that the bishops, realizing the president's double talk, had decided to change tack in campaigning against the RH bill. Instead of dealing with a president who was to stay on until 2016, why not deal with lawmakers in the Lower House? Church leaders still held sway in the local level and therefore could influence the local elections.<sup>46</sup>

Arguelles said it was agreed that each bishop would talk directly with House members under their ecclesiastical jurisdiction and convince them to drop support for the bill. "It is a personal campaign aimed at telling our lawmakers the lies behind the RH," Arguelles said. This change of tack was confirmed by Palawan Bishop Pedro Arigo in a separate interview.<sup>47</sup>

Apparently, the strategy worked. Seven lawmakers from the minority bloc, who were initially co-authors of the bill in the House of Representatives, withdrew their support. Minority leader Danilo Suarez, who was initially one of the main sponsors, said he had a change of heart after visiting developed countries with aging populations.<sup>48</sup>

In August 2012, the Church staged an anti-RH bill rally at the historic EDSA Shrine in Ortigas which was attended by around 10,000 people. And a day before the House of Representatives voted on whether to finally terminate the RH bill debates, CBCP secretary-general Monsignor Joselito Asis issued a veiled threat to pro-RH bill lawmakers that the Church would campaign against them in the midterm elections.<sup>49</sup>

At the Senate, the Church's point person to block the passage of the bill was Senator Vicente Sotto III.

The majority leader—a former comedian and one-third of the TV noontime show trio Tito, Vic and Joey—rejected the bill because it supposedly led to the premature death of his son, Vincent Paul, who died five months after he was born in 1975. He blamed the contraceptives used by his wife, actress Helen Gamboa, for his son's death.

During the deliberations, Sotto had met with the bishops a couple of times to update them on the progress of the bill in the Senate.

## LIP SERVICE

In the meantime, what has the Church done to promote natural family planning, which to it is the only moral way? Generally, it has only paid lip service.

Except for the Cagayan de Oro diocese and the RCAM, bishops have not allocated resources and manpower to disseminate information on the NFP. But even in richer dioceses like the RCAM, only token funds were allotted.

In an interview, Manila Auxiliary Bishop Broderick Pabillo said the promotion of NFP by the lay was one of the mission statements that the Church adopted when it convened the Plenary Council of the Philippines II in 1991. “We saw it was important to promote NFP, but there was no manpower. You had to train people for this,” Pabillo said.<sup>50</sup>

In 2004, the RCAM put up the Pope John Paul II Family Planning Center to spread the good news of natural family planning but the unit had been barely functioning, with only two to three permanent staff and a few volunteers. In June 2011, Pabillo suggested that they tap additional volunteers for the 13 vicariates—but only four at that time were willing to work as full-time volunteers.

Still, the NFP promotion under RCAM only targeted married couples, out of concern that those unmarried could use the NFP for the wrong reason. “In the eyes of the Church, [the promotion of NFP] is only legitimate in the context of married life,” said Lily Perez, an NFP trainer for the Church.<sup>51</sup>

## WHAT NOW?

On December 17, 2012, after a 14-year saga, Congress finally passed the RH bill on the third and final reading, with a little push from President Aquino. The Senate followed a day later. In the House, a total of 133 lawmakers voted in favor of the bill, with 79 against it. In the Senate, it sailed through with 13 senators voting in the affirmative and eight dissenting.<sup>52</sup>

Aquino certified the bill as urgent on December 13, after it was narrowly approved in the House with 113 voting in favor and 104 against. If at all, the close result in the second reading showed that bishops still held sway on local leaders and lawmakers.

For instance, in Batangas, all four congressmen voted “no.” Arguelles said in an interview that he talked with the four district representatives who assured him that they would vote against RH. Cebu province, under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of CBCP president Archbishop Jose Palma, delivered four “no” votes out of six in the second reading, with Cebu City delivering the fifth non placet.

Aquino critic Butuan Bishop Juan de Dios Pueblos, whose ecclesiastical jurisdiction covered Agusan del Norte and Agusan del Sur, delivered three out of four votes. Former CBCP president Tandag bishop Nereo Odchimar provided the same number.

In Manila, under the control of the newly crowned cardinal, Archbishop Luis Antonio Tagle, four voted “no” out of six congressional districts.

But elsewhere, the Church was handily beaten. In the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, for instance, the bailiwick of the Muslim population, the bishops failed to get any “no” votes.

In Pangasinan, under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of CBCP vice president Archbishop Socrates Villegas, the votes were evenly split among the six districts there. In Bulacan, under Oliveros, “yes” won with two votes.

In Pampanga, a hotbed for priests having affairs, Archbishop Paciano Aniceto was only able to convince one legislator to vote “no.” Two were absent while one voted “yes.” Perhaps out of respect for the beloved Aniceto, all four Pampanga representatives were not around to participate in the voting.

In Cavite, where Tagle was assigned before being appointed as Manila archbishop, only two out of seven representatives voted “no.” The Vatican had not appointed any replacement for Tagle as yet.

Another major disappointment for the Church was Jaro archbishop and former CBCP president Angel Lagdameo, where only one voted “no” out of the seven votes in Iloilo.

Asked to explain what happened, Arguelles in an interview said it was likely that some of his colleagues failed to exert enough pressure on the lawmakers to toe the Church line following the initial success with the sponsors of the bill. In August 2012, out of the original 14 principal sponsors in the House, seven withdrew their support. It was a fatal mistake.

“Some may have been halfhearted, or thought they had the issue in the bag,” he said.<sup>53</sup>



Buoyed by the initial success with the bill's original sponsors, it was no surprise that the bishops were confident they had the numbers to make an upset. But Malacañang pushed the right buttons at the right time.

Before the vote on the second reading took place, Arguelles was at the House session hall to observe the proceedings. From the session hall, he was sending text messages to this journalist that Budget Secretary Florencio Abad, Interior and Local Government Secretary Mar Roxas, and presidential spokesperson Edwin Lacierda were present. It was an ominous sign.

“The presence of the three was a form of pressure from Malacañang. They dangled pork barrel to those who were supposed to vote ‘no’ and got away with it,” Arguelles said. Malacañang denied it used the pork barrel, or congressional allocation to district representatives, to force them to vote in favor of the RH measure.

Reporting his finding to the CBCP, Archbishop Villegas, in his capacity as vice president, issued a pastoral statement titled “Contraception is Corruption” in a not-so-oblique reference to Malacañang’s move to buy the congresspeople’s votes. But the battle has been lost.

At this point, the bishops could only hope that they would be proven right in the end. As Lagdameo put it: “Only the future will tell who has acted wisely or not.”<sup>54</sup>

P a r t T h r e e

C H A P T E R 12

RESPECTING  
CHURCH-STATE  
BOUNDARIES

COULD THERE EVER BE A HEALTHY ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN Church and State, one where there is little tension, without the quid pro quo and the accusations of betrayal? Could there be a harmonious relationship without crossing the line supposedly separating them? Could they coexist peacefully without losing respect for each other's boundaries?

The diocese of Novaliches and the Department of Interior of Local Government proved it could be done.

While the national government and the Church hierarchy were locking horns over the reproductive health bill, which was hampered by the bishops pulling out of the negotiations, the Novaliches diocese under Bishop Antonio Tobias and the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) were silently working together for good governance at the barangay level.

It was a partnership that spread to the neighboring dioceses of Cubao and Kalookan and was soon to be replicated in Cebu. Dubbed *Ugnayan ng Barangay at Simbahan* (UBAS), it offered a different take on

the Church and state dynamic, with a shared goal of achieving good governance, people empowerment, and barangay development.

It was Interior and Local Government Secretary Jesse Robredo, a Marian devotee, who set the ball rolling for this Church-government partnership, realizing the crucial role that parishes play in barangays. It almost did not take off, as none of the bishops he invited responded positively, except for Tobias, one of the more militant bishops. This project proved to be one of Robredo's more enduring legacies.

## LETTER FOR PARTNERSHIP

In his letter to the bishops in January 2011, Robredo sought the bishops' support for the Church to engage with local governments, taking off from a November 2010 speech of Pope Benedict XVI to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines. Robredo quoted the Pope's words: "At times, this task of proclamation touches upon issues relevant to political sphere. This is not surprising since the political community and the Church, while rightly distinct, are nevertheless both at the service of the integral development of every human being and of society as a whole."<sup>1</sup>

Robredo asked the bishops if they could urge their network of parishes to actively participate in local governance processes, particularly the barangay assembly sessions and deliberations in the Barangay Development Council. He wanted the church to espouse good governance by being members of barangay committees.

"A possibility is of such engagement to be spearheaded through the basic ecclesial communities, the grassroots units of the Church," Robredo wrote.

The secretary also suggested that the Church might want to have an active role in ensuring transparency and accountability in local budget and finances, and the bids and public offerings. They could do this by monitoring projects. He said that based on Republic Act 10147, or the General Appropriations Act of 2011, LGUs are required to fully disclose their local budget, finances, and disbursements.

During his stint in government (which was cut short when Robredo died in a plane crash in August 2012), he spearheaded the full-disclosure policy that required all local officials to make their budget and expenses public and that these be posted in areas accessible to all.<sup>2</sup> As of June 2012, 99 percent of LGUs had complied with the policy.

In February 2011, Tobias replied affirmatively to Robredo, adding that he hoped that the partnership "can be the start of a closer collaboration, though at times critical, between the government and the Church."

"The diocese welcomes your proposal as the last national elections have made us realize how badly needed the local Church [is] to be involved in governance to help elected officials deliver their election promises," Tobias said.

## NOT THE FIRST TIME

In the past, the Catholic Church did engage government institutions in promoting good governance—whether as an active player or in a supporting role.

When Simeon Marcelo was Ombudsman during the early years of the Arroyo administration, he sought the participation of Catholic bishops in an anti-corruption campaign that saw the birth of the Coalition Against Corruption (CAC). A former seminarian, Marcelo said he was inspired by the examples set by the Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Government in Abra province and the *Barug! Pilipino* (Stand Up! Filipino) group in Cebu province where the Church played a major role in anti-corruption and good governance campaigns.

Marcelo said he wanted to tap the resources and the extensive network of the Church to help monitor possible areas of corruption, including lifestyle checks on public officials. “In the Philippines, the Catholic Church is the only private institution that is capable of providing a nationwide, ready network of people who can implement the projects and programs designed and tested by our anti-corruption [non government organizations],” Marcelo observed.<sup>3</sup>

During the CBCP plenary in July 2004, Marcelo presented his proposal to the Church leadership, which the bishops welcomed with open arms. In September 2004, the CAC was formed, composed of the CBCP National Secretariat for Social Action, the Makati Business Club, Code-NGO, Bishops-Businessmen’s Conference for Human Development, Transparency and Accountability Network, and other groups. Under the project, the CAC would focus on: textbook count; bids and awards committee observers’ training; monitoring of medicines; internal revenue allotment monitoring; pork barrel monitoring; a lifestyle check program; volunteer lawyers’ prosecution support; and advocacy on Comelec cases.

Marcelo’s initiative soon caught the attention of other Church leaders. The following month, Marcelo signed an agreement with the *Barug! Pilipino*, headed by Cebu Cardinal Ricardo Vidal. The group would help the Ombudsman gather data for the lifestyle checks on government officials and personnel.

In the prelature of Ipil, the Church organized the Inter-Faith Coalition for Good Governance and the Local Government, Churches and Communities for Peace which focused on values education. The Diocese of Maasin also got involved in the monitoring of textbook deliveries to public schools.

In Iloilo province, Jaro Archbishop Angel Lagdameo gave the go signal for the church-based group People’s Graftwatch to partner with the Ombudsman in observing the bidding process and the conduct of lifestyle checks.

In Luzon, 13 dioceses in Regions 1 (Northern Luzon) and 2 (Cagayan Valley) and the Cordillera Autonomous Region formed the Northern Luzon Coalition for Good Governance in 2005 to help in the anti-corruption campaign.

The partnership with the Church, however, proved short-lived as Marcelo resigned in December 2005 (Marcelo was appointed Ombudsman in October 2002 and had a seven-year tenure). Officially, he cited health reasons for his abrupt resignation but political observers said his ties with Arroyo had soured due

to pressures from Malacañang to go easy in going after corruption. He was replaced by Merceditas Gutierrez, who was perceived to be a Palace lackey and protective of the Arroyos.

In an ironic twist, the CAC, which Marcelo helped form, would later call on Gutierrez to resign for failing to measure up to the demands of the job. Three years into the post, the CAC said Gutierrez should step down “lest she impose greater damage upon the office of the Ombudsman and further erode the people’s trust in our public institutions.”<sup>4</sup>

Gutierrez would parry such calls for resignation. But in April 2011, she resigned to stave off a looming impeachment trial for her removal.

## POINT OF CONVERGENCE

Father Antonio Labiao, vicar-general of the Novaliches diocese, said the partnership with the DILG was formally launched in April 2011, which saw the participation of representatives from the dioceses of Novaliches, Kalookan, and Cubao, along with city mayors, barangay leaders from the three dioceses, and the national police.

Initially, the Novaliches diocese tried the partnership in five barangays. The setup involved the parish acting as a forum where issues confronting barangays were discussed and solutions proposed. “Each barangay had its own concerns. Some were concerned about illegal settlers, some about garbage, some on illegal drugs, some on criminality and corruption. Some identified protection of the child and climate risk management. The Church became a point of convergence,” Labiao said.

UBAS, in a sense, addressed two weaknesses of the barangays and the Church via the parishes.

As the smallest political unit, barangays are mostly driven by the politics of accommodation and are usually active only during elections. Among the specific problems included low participation by the people in human-rights issues, peace and order problems, corruption, and the like.

As for the parishes, many priests see their role only on the spiritual level without actively engaging in barangay concerns. Labiao said some Novaliches priests had this problem. “They do not care beyond the pulpit. They confine themselves to their comfort zones,” he said.

But Tobias wanted to change this mindset. “They have to get out of their spiritual confines. Priests are also serving the same people as the barangay officials,” Labiao said. After all, he said, the call of the new evangelization “is not limited to spiritual salvation but also include freedom from oppression, development of man, and renewal of society.”

“Through this interaction, the Church, barangays, and the DILG found a common ground of cooperation,” Labiao added.

In her presentation about the UBAS initiative, Rosalinda Fuentes, dean of the Southeast Asia Interdisciplinary Institute’s Graduate School of Organization Development, observed that the consultation and information sharing led to specific projects. These included a cleanup drive of the barangay, values formation on good governance, more systematic feeding for children of financially deprived families, a campaign against drug abuse, tree planting to save a watershed, solid waste management, traffic management, increased advocacy on people’s participation in good governance, the promotion of transparency in barangay relocations, a relocation program for informal settlers, and a livelihood program for out-of-school youth.<sup>5</sup>

## GOOD GOVERNANCE

The Novaliches diocese is no stranger to good governance. Transparency, accountability, equity, consultation, and information-sharing are among the trademarks of Tobias’s management.

When he set foot as bishop there in 2003,<sup>6</sup> Tobias started reforms in the financial administration of the diocese. (He replaced Bishop Teodoro Bacani who resigned after he was implicated by his secretary in a sexual-harassment complaint.)

Every November of each year, he sat down with parish priests individually for an annual assessment of their finances and budget for the next year. Every month, every parish priest was required to submit a financial statement for the previous month.

Thus, it was no surprise that when Robredo asked for Church collaboration on good governance, it was the Novaliches diocese that was the first to respond. It was also the diocese of Novaliches that encouraged its neighboring dioceses—Cubao and Kalookan—to give the UBAS project a try.

In his address during the launch and covenant signing of the Memorandum of Agreement for Church participation in barangay affairs, Tobias assured that the Church had no ulterior motive in the partnership. “We are not here to seek public office. That is prohibited for clerics. Partisan politics is running for office.”

But “our Church should lead the way. We should show our barangay leaders to coordinate, to serve our community. The Roman Catholic Church maintains that the Church and the government are separate, but they work for the common good. In the level of the barangay, we will be more palpable,” Tobias said.<sup>7</sup>

Cubao Bishop Honesto Ongtioco saw the partnership as “pastoral accompaniment, journeying together.” He likened it to a railway—two parallel lines that are separate but with the same destination.<sup>8</sup>

Barangay leaders said the collaboration of the Church with the barangays lent credibility to their action programs, which were normally viewed with suspicion by their constituents. *Liga ng mga Barangay* Chairpersons president Rico Echiverri said the presence of the Church would make barangay officials more accountable. He noted that only a few barangays held the required State of Barangay Address (SOBA), which are supposed to take place twice a year.

“If there were, these were just *moro-moro* [mock play]. Those who attended were the members, the *tanod*, the barangay health workers. We are not being scrutinized, we are weak. The best check and balance comes from the Church. We ask the Church to announce the SOBA during masses. The Church has better personnel. With the partnership, it will be dynamic,” Echiverri said.

The point of cooperation can be in gender development, protection of children, solid waste management, health campaigns, and even on reproductive health rights, with the Church helping in information and education, Echiverri said.



## RH ISSUE

What about on the RH issue over which the Church and state are at loggerheads? Will there be a point of convergence?

Labiao said that so far, the issue of reproductive health rights and issues such as the promotion of family planning programs, whether artificial or natural, had not cropped up in the initial barangay interaction. “The focus is on good governance and delivery of basic services like food, livelihood, [and] housing programs.”

Three months after the launch in April 2012, the Cebu archdiocese followed, signing a covenant with the DILG and the barangay for cooperation on good governance.<sup>9</sup>

*“Malaking bahagi ho ‘to sa matuwid na daan. Ang paniwala ho ng pamahalaan, mahalaga ‘yung simbahan, mahalaga ‘yung civil society, para ho maisaayos natin ang pagpapamahala. Kami ho, ginagawa namin ito, hindi lang sa Cebu, kundi sa iba pang bahagi ng bansa. Na sana ho, magising yong mamamayan na ang tunay na kapangyarihan ay nasa kanya* (This is a huge part towards our journey to the straight path. We in government believe that the Church and the civil society are important in our quest for good governance. We are doing this not only in Cebu, but also in other parts of the country. We hope that the people will wake up and realize that true power resides in them),” Robredo said of the event.

And more dioceses were following in the footsteps of Novaliches, Cubao, and Kalookan. On September 5, 2012, the Lipa Archdiocese and the La Union and Cotabato dioceses sent their representatives to Novaliches for “exposure” to UBAS activities.

The dioceses of Davao, Digos, and Samar have also sent requests for a seminar and orientation on how UBAS works. Labiao said about 38 dioceses had expressed interest to replicate the UBAS model in their jurisdictions. Robredo’s legacy has started to spread.

P a r t F o u r

C H A P T E R 13

THE FAILED  
PROMISE OF CHANGE  
AND RENEWAL

**M**ORE THAN 20 YEARS AGO, NUEVA CACERES ARCHBISHOP Leonardo Legaspi, who was then the head of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, set forth in motion a task that sought to redefine the Church's socio-pastoral strategy. It was a period of drastic changes: the people had just deposed an autocratic leader with the help of the Church, democracy had been restored, a new government with the blessings of the Church had been installed, and the Church was enjoying clout and influence that had been muted for some time.

Legaspi—a former rector of the Pontifical University of Santo Tomas, a member of the permanent council of the secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, and a member of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institute in the Vatican—realized it was the perfect time to reassess the Church's role in society. The Church and state were on a honeymoon, unlike during the Marcos regime when both sides eyed each other with suspicion.

It was the best of times for the Church. It was also at the cusp of change.

“I thought it was a good time to reassess and redefine our role. The relationship with the state was good, unlike during the Marcos time where the Church's relationship with the state was turbulent. It was a good time to reflect and identify issues that the Church can confront as a whole,” Legaspi said. The prelate first soared to national consciousness in 1983 when he led the Mass at Senator Benigno Aquino's funeral.<sup>1</sup>

With a more open climate, what better time to reflect and respond to the challenges ahead? “We can think more deeply about the issues, issues that we can control, that are imposed on us,” Legaspi said. “Because of that, we needed to come together and the most appropriate canonical forum for that was a meeting of the bishops.”

As the main architect of the ambitious Church renewal, Legaspi gathered and tapped the best minds and most influential figures in the Church—Cardinal Sin, Cebu Cardinal Ricardo Vidal, then Dumaguete Bishop Angel Lagdameo, Manila Auxiliary Bishop Teodoro Buhain, Malolos Bishop Cirilo Almario, and Cebu Auxiliary Bishop Vicente Manuel. Each tackled issues confronting the Church—from religious to social concerns, Christian living, and the laity.



*Retired Nueva Caceres Archbishop Leonardo Legaspi*

They planned a national gathering of representatives from the clergy and the laity, the first of its kind to be held since the First Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP I) in January 1953 and the Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965. The latter led to a paradigm shift on the universal Church's involvement in secular and religious affairs. Church experts said it was the singular most significant religious event in the last 500 years: a Church now believing in democracy and human rights, with the laity as much a part of the Church as its leaders.

PCP I was attended by six archbishops, 21 bishops, four apostolic prelates, and 21 superiors of male religious congregations.<sup>2</sup> At that time, the issues confronting the Church were the growing religious indifference and the spread of the communist ideology in the countryside. Thus, the decrees that were adopted centered on the propagation of the Catholic faith in the country.

But PCP I did not really take off and failed to make any dent on the Philippine Catholic Church. One reason is that it took almost four years before the Vatican approved the decrees sought to be promulgated by PCP I. It was also overtaken by the Second Vatican Council where the universal Church took drastic steps in redefining its theological and pastoral priorities.

On January 20, 1991, Legaspi convened the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II), which saw the participation of 489 representatives from the clergy and the laity. At that time, the number of dioceses had grown to around 80—and lay groups along with religious groups, both of men and women, had grown exponentially. In this conference, 96 bishops, 181 priests, 21 major religious superiors, 12 presidents or rectors of Catholic universities, 24 rectors or deans of seminaries, and 146 in the laity took part.

Legaspi said the participants were confronted with two major issues: “How we live as Christians and as Filipino Catholics and what kind of Church must we be to meet the challenge of society as we enter the third millennium?” These two questions were pondered by the participants until they wrapped up their proceedings on February 17, 1991.

Inspired by the “vivid model of the early Christian communities,” PCP II envisioned a “Church of the

Poor”, one that was committed to empowering the poor and to work with them for social justice.

This theme, which became the centerpiece of the PCP II—was not the original intention of the participants. Bacani said it was only during the second half of the conference that participants came up with the preferential option for the poor as the central theme of PCP II.

In an article written for the East Asian Pastoral Institute, Bacani, who chaired the Commission for Religious Concerns for PCP II, recalled how the theme was arrived at: “Very few expected PCP II to take this option. The makeup of the assembly did not seem to favor it, because the participants were mostly from the economically well-to-do social classes. The option emerged only in the second half of the month-long meeting. But after it had emerged and was approved with applause from the assembly, Archbishop Leonardo Z. Legazpi, O.P., President of the assembly, said in his final homily, ‘... The Church has become the sign of renewal in electing to be a Church of the Poor. The impact of a Church of the Poor on our vision and mission is immeasurable.’”<sup>3</sup>

The promise of PCP II was encompassing, ambitious, even radical. Bacani further wrote:

“The Church of the Poor is one where ‘at the very least the poor are not discriminated against because of their poverty, and they will not be deprived of their right to receive in abundance the help of the spiritual goods of the Church, especially that of the word of God and the sacraments from the pastors.’ In practice, no one is to be deprived of the sacraments or the services of the Church simply because they cannot pay the usual stole fees. The practice of having ‘classes’ for the celebration of the sacraments is also called into question.

“The Church of the Poor means that ‘the pastors and other Church leaders will give preferential attention and time to those who are poor, and will generously share of their own resources in order to alleviate their poverty and make them recognize the love of the Lord for them despite their poverty.’ Immersion by pastors and Church leaders among the poor is suggested as a way of knowing the poor.

“The Church of the Poor will practice solidarity with the poor. ‘It will collaborate with the poor themselves and with others to lift up the poor from their poverty.’ (LG Number 8 is cited)

“The Church of the Poor will remind the rich of their duties and will condemn injustices committed against the poor. ‘Pastors and members of the church will courageously defend and vindicate the rights of the poor and the oppressed, even when doing so will mean alienation or persecution from the rich and powerful.’ (PCP II Acts, paragraph 131)

“Church of the Poor will also mean that the Church will not only evangelize the poor but that the poor will themselves become evangelizers. In its work of evangelization, there will be a preferential reliance on the poor. (PCP II Acts, paragraph 132)

“Pastors and leaders of such a Church of the Poor will not compete for the most prosperous parishes or offices... . Rather, they will live simply in order to share what they have with the

needy after the example of Christ. (PCP II Acts, paragraph 133)”

“Pastors and leaders of such a Church of the Poor will not compete for the most prosperous parishes or offices, and will not ambition for titles and honors ... Rather, they will live simply in order to share what they have with the needy after the example of Christ. (PCP II Acts, paragraph 133)

“In the Church of the Poor ‘the entire community of disciples, especially the rich and better-off sectors of the community and its leaders and pastors, will have such a love of preference for the poor as to orient and tilt the center of gravity of the entire community in favor of the needy.’” (PCP II Acts, paragraph 134)

However, like its predecessor, PCP II’s promise of change was not to be fulfilled.

## ACTIVIST CHURCH

In truth, the Church's preferential option for the poor had been there all along, concretized through the basic Christian communities (BCCs) that had taken root in rural areas in the Visayas and Mindanao.

In 1967, the local Church's National Rural Congress saw the official launch of the BCCs in the country. A year before, the Latin American Episcopal Conference held a congress in Medellin, Colombia, which adopted its own version of BCCs, fueled by a movement dubbed as "liberation theology."

The Latin American bishops agreed that the Church should take the "preferential option for the poor" which influenced the formation of local BCCs in the Philippines. Then, as now, widespread poverty, inequality, and violence characterized the situation of the poor in both Latin America and in the Philippines, serving as fertile ground for an activist Church.

Monsignor Manuel Gabriel, one of the foremost Church authorities on the BCC, said the communities "promote the mission of the Church to transform society through evangelization. The communities are formed to respond to issues and problems affecting the exercise of faith and the demands of the Gospel." To Gabriel, BCC was a tool for "social transformation and development."<sup>4</sup> It was also a tool for forging community organizations and sectoral groups such as for farmers, women, and cultural minorities.

Jesuit priest Antonio Moreno credits the BCCs "for mainstreaming the participation of local communities" in sociopolitical issues affecting the country. He said the roots of BCCs in the Philippines emerged when the CBCP launched the National Rural Congress in January 1967 to address the concerns of the rural population. "In this way, the Church steered clear of town-centered Catholicism that has so characterized much of faith practice since the time of the Spanish conquest."<sup>5</sup>

The Maryknoll Missionaries introduced the first BCCs in the Tagum Prelature in Mindanao and a similar attempt was initiated in the Prelature of Malaybalay. "Both stressed lay leadership and participation, face-to-face interaction, prayer, and reflection founded on biblical texts and *kapilya-based* communities which tackled various local and provincial issues," Moreno wrote.

Combining faith-based teachings with social teaching, the BCC phenomenon spread to several provinces, changing Church engagement with communities. The dictatorial political atmosphere also helped spur the phenomenon. "BCCs virtually regenerated [the] Church's presence in the rural areas, since the church was basically town-centered. This was particularly the case in many local churches in Mindanao," Moreno observed.

Gabriel said the BCCs started to take shape in 1965 and reached their height in the mid '80s. "The BCCs were in the mission areas where there was poverty, injustice, [and] human rights violations," Gabriel said in an interview.<sup>6</sup> In a BCC, "the priest was both a missionary and a visionary."

In the dioceses of Malaybalay (Bukidnon) and Bacolod, for instance, the Church and the laity worked side by side in championing social and human rights issues in the two provinces. The strong presence of the BCC movement in the two dioceses ensured the collaboration between the Church and laity, with the former playing the activist role. It was taken to the extreme by some priests in some areas, like Bacolod, where the clergy became so engrossed with sociopolitical issues that they ran in conflict with their

bishop.

Bishop Camilo Gregorio said “clashes of opinion” with Bacolod priests led to contrasting positions on how the Church should play its role in the socioeconomic sphere and in society. It was an 11-year tug of war, with Gregorio trying “to preserve orthodoxy” amid the radical views of his priests whom, he said, “lacked spiritual awakening. Although the enthusiasm to help the poor was there and admirable, I thought the motivation was questionable.”<sup>7</sup>

The differences in approach led to a division of the clergy, with one camp supportive of Gregorio and the other, which sought his ouster. The Vatican, in a bid to restrain the growing restiveness in the Bacolod diocese, asked Gregorio to resign. “The Papal Nuncio suggested that I resign,” he admitted. After a three-year hiatus, he was appointed as Batanes bishop.

Looking back, Gregorio said his experience in Bacolod “was a humbling one, although I understand why they [priests] were like that.”



## STEP BACKWARD

With the extreme and radical views of some priests, many advocating liberation theology, the BCCs fell under suspicion from the Marcos regime and the military, suspecting these were being used as fronts by communist groups. Priests, nuns, religious and lay members working for the BCCs were arrested. The CBCP issued a pastoral letter in 1977 to denounce the crackdown: “It is most unfortunate that in many cases, this evangelizing work of forming and strengthening the Basic Christian Communities has been misunderstood and has led to the arrests of priest, religious and lay members, even the deportation of foreign missionaries.”<sup>8</sup>

The harassment of the BCCs and the issuance of the 1977 pastoral letter proved to be a turning point for the CBCP, which had been divided between those critical of the regime and those who had no stand at all. As Monsignor Lope Robredillo observed: “Henceforth, the Conference no longer engaged in the pronouncement of principles, as it did in 1969. Instead, it courageously made moral judgment, denouncing the excesses of the regime.



*Retired Gaudencio Cardinal Rosales passing the torch to Luis Antonio Cardinal Tagle.*

As the socioeconomic and political situation deteriorated, and as militarization and repression intensified, the CBCP came out with the pastoral letter, “Exhortation Against Violence,” on October 7, 1979, to stress that the escalating violence in the country had its roots in the unjust structure of society, and that it could be stopped by putting peace and justice in the same structure.

Marcos lifted martial law in 1981, but this was merely a token move (it was most likely timed for Pope John Paul II’s pastoral visit to the country from February 17 to 22). In fact, the following year was a bad one for the Church, for it saw what amounted to Church persecution: arrests and detention of priests, lay workers, and activists; raids of religious institutions; attempts at infiltration; accusation of communist

infiltration in the Church; trial by publicity in the media, etc.”<sup>9, 10</sup>

Moreno writes that BCCs often found their position aligned “with the political line of the CPP-NDF [Communist Party of the Philippines-National Democratic Front]. For instance, the BCCs in 1986, and most of them in 1992 boycotted the elections, following the official CPP-NDF line. Some members joined the armed struggle at the height of militarization from 1978 to 1980.”<sup>11</sup>

The BCC phenomenon, however, declined after the ouster of Marcos and the return of a more democratic atmosphere “that defused an all-out conflict with the state unlike during the time of Marcos,” Moreno said. “Second, the decline of BCCs was a universal phenomenon in the 1980s and the 1990s. With the diminishing significance of liberation theology in Latin America, BCCs likewise suffered similarly.” In Negros Occidental, for instance, where the BBC movement was strong, “the decline of the underground Left in the Philippines, particularly its split in the early 1990s in the aftermath of the collapse of the socialist bloc in Europe, further undermined the BCC movement in Negros that had considerable Marxist influence.”

Following PCP II, BCCs were renamed basic ecclesial communities (BECs), in an apparent effort to remove the stain of the communist tag. In PCP II, BECs were defined as “small communities of Christians, usually of families, who gather around the Word of God and the Eucharist. These communities are united to their pastors but are ministered to regularly by lay leaders. The members know each other by name and share not only the Word of God and the Eucharist but also their concerns, both material and spiritual. They have a strong sense of belongingness and of responsibility for one another.” (PCP II 138)

“Usually emerging at the grassroots among poor farmers and workers, Basic Ecclesial Communities consciously strive to integrate their faith in their daily life. They are guided and encouraged by regular catechesis. Poverty and faith bond their members to act for justice, and toward a vibrant celebration of life in the liturgy.” (PCP II 139).

“The assessment was the Church, the CBCP, remains an old boys club.”

“Basic Ecclesial Communities under various names and forms—BCCs, small Christian communities, covenant communities—must be vigorously promoted for the full living of the Christian vocation in both urban and rural areas.” (PCP II decrees, article 109)<sup>12</sup>

Except in some areas, the attraction of BECs however had lost its luster. Gabriel blamed this on the new set of bishops and the generation of clergy “who are more inward-looking than outward-looking. These bishops and clergy are more concerned with liturgical services than to reach out to the poor.”

In a National Clergy Assessment held in 2012, with 200 priests participating, the Philippine Church as a “Church of the Poor” was found wanting. “The assessment was that the Church, the CBCP, remains an old boys club,” Gabriel said. The dream of transforming it into a Church of the Poor remained elusive.

Aloysius Cartagenas, a former Jesuit priest and former rector of the San Carlos Seminary in Cebu, said the BECs, as a pastoral strategy of PCP II, got wayward when “each diocese reappropriated [the

program] in whatever way they wished, often moving drastically away from its holistic and prophetic framework.” The renaming of the BECs, from BCCs, is “to emphasize ecclesiastical control. To date, many of these communities are concerned with cultic or worshipping activities; others function as the *longa manus* (long arm) of the hierarchy’s agenda in the public sphere or a herd ready to be summoned to generate a display of force in sheer numbers in religious processions or devotional ceremonies.”<sup>13</sup>

## MISSING PASTORAL PLANS

One of the outputs from PCP II was the National Pastoral Plan (NPP) which required all dioceses and religious orders and CBCP commissions to come up with versions in their own level.

A committee was formed to draw up this document in July 1992. Legaspi said the committee divided the proposed NPP into two themes: based on areas of concern and major issues.

For example, in the diocese of Borongan, one of the poorest dioceses in the Philippines, it categorized its diocesan pastoral plan into four major concerns: Christian life, religious concerns, social concerns, and agents of communion and renewal. The different programs of action of the diocese included, among others: 1) various forms of response to the fundamentalist challenge (or the growth of the born-again movement); 2) promotion of mission awareness; 3) active involvement in political issues and elections; 4) monitoring of violations of human rights; 5) social programs for the poor and calamity victims; 6) encouragement of various types of faith communities; 7) program for priests in crisis; 8) utilization of mass media for evangelization; and 9) the gradual abolition of the arancel system. (The arancel system is a Church practice where fixed fees are charged for those who avail themselves of Church services. The fees are meant to support the expenses of the parish.)<sup>14</sup>

In the Archdiocese of Nueva Caceres, Legaspi said the diocesan pastoral plan focused on catechesis and seminary formation and vocation. He said that in 1991, there were 38 parishes under his control. Now, there are 88 parishes that have been established under the archdiocese.

To realize its objective to become the Church of the Poor, PCP II also encouraged the promotion of BECs “as a place for the poor to participate in the evangelization of society through the struggle for justice; to foster a more active role of the laity; to rectify the bad image of the priesthood given by some uncelibate priests; and for the bishops and clergy to refrain from partisan politics,” among others.<sup>15</sup>

Twenty years after PCP II, the Church as a whole failed in these aspects. Like most secular laws, PCP II was only good in paper, with the Church hierarchy recognizing only the “letters” of PCP II but not its “spirit.”

In 2001, on the 10th anniversary of PCP II, then CBCP president Orlando Quevedo convened the National Pastoral Council for Church Renewal (NPCCR) to gauge how PCP II had been implemented thus far. He found out that not many knew about the mission and vision of PCP II and was reportedly so disappointed that he described the CBCP document as “one of the most well-kept secrets of the Church.”

In a speech delivered at the BEC National Assembly held in Cebu in November 2002, Quevedo concluded that “no substantial renewal seems to be taking place” despite the many-splendored promise of PCP II. In a sweeping indictment of the Church’s failure, he noted during the NCCR reflection: “The Church in the Philippines has, to our shame, also remained unchanged in some respects. Many decrees of PCP-II have not been implemented due to: weakness in formation and education, lack of defined diocesan pastoral directions and programs, [and] deficiencies in structures. More deeply, failures in renewal, due to hardness of heart and resistance to conversion.”

“The Church in the Philippines has, to our shame, also remained unchanged in some respects.”

Quevedo pointed out that the Church hierarchy was partly to blame. “We share some responsibility for many of the continuing ills of Philippine society because: new attitudes, options, and lifestyles demanded by the vision of a renewed Church—honored only in words, rejected in life, even by some in positions of leadership; inaction, uncritical acceptance of values and patterns of behavior of the dominant society; lack of consistent witnessing.”<sup>16, 17</sup>

Expectedly, Legaspi, the brains behind PCP II, did not concur with Quevedo’s opinion. In an interview, Legaspi said Cardinal Vidal also had the same initial impression but still he changed this when he found out that there were pastoral plans in some of the dioceses and these were being implemented in varying degrees.

Legaspi said that Quevedo had a change of heart after realizing his initial mistake. He quoted Quevedo as saying: “I need somehow to revise my initial thesis that led to the NPCCR. My thesis then was the belief that PCP II’s initiative for integral renewal faded away gradually after the first four or five years of tremendous pastoral vigor and enthusiasm. Perhaps from another angle, this is not correct, as His Eminence Ricardo Vidal had observed.”<sup>18</sup>

## FIXATED ON ELECTIONS, NOT ON REFORMS

What led Quevedo to initially conclude that PCP II was an utter failure? What prompted him to say that the vision and mission of PCP II had not been carried out? What triggered the frustration of the activist prelate?

The answer lies in simple arithmetic.

More than 20 years since PCP I's debut, only 59 out of the 86 archdioceses, dioceses, vicariates, and prelatures in the Philippines (there are 16 ecclesiastical provinces, 59 dioceses, seven apostolic vicariates, and four prelatures) had pastoral plans to show for under PCP II. The rest had either no diocesan pastoral plans for the implementation of PCP II or were still in the process of drafting one.

At the time the decrees of PCP II were adopted, Legaspi said that some dioceses might have been ready, while others were not. Still, others were just starting to be aware of it or were just beginning to appreciate it. It is also possible "that they were not aware that they had to come up with a pastoral plan. Or perhaps they did not pay attention."

He said those bishops who were not able to come up with their own diocesan pastoral plans may have been bogged down with administrative work. "You know these bishops, they go to the plenary, they approve and when they go back to their dioceses, they forget about it."

Still, during the 2001 pastoral consultation, 44 dioceses were able to present their pastoral plans to implement the vision of PCP II, he added.

The question is: how encompassing and how far-reaching were the pastoral plans to effect a Church renewal and societal change as envisioned by PCP II?

Legaspi said the majority of pastoral plans spoke of renewing the political order through political education and election monitoring. In an interview, Manila Auxiliary Bishop Broderick Pabillo, head of the CBCP's social arm, the National Secretariat for Social Action, Justice and Peace (Nassa), said the active involvement of Church-based groups like the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) and the National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (Namfrel) was a good manifestation of lay participation in social transformation as envisioned by PCP II.<sup>19</sup>

The establishment of the Ang Kapatiran Party, whose presidential bet John Carlos de los Reyes was supported by some bishops in the 2010 national polls, was also an example of lay empowerment in politics, Pabillo said.

While such programs are laudable, it betrays the shortsightedness of the pastoral plans and how the Church still sees itself in the political scheme of things.

Dennis Gonzales, former associate dean of the Ateneo School of Government, observed that the Church's response to strengthening democracy and in evangelizing politics had been seasonal at best, alive only when there were elections and in deep hibernation in between. "Yes, they engage in political education in voter education, but these instances are not every day," he said. For a truly political pastoral plan to be effective, it should be sustained and should have "institutional effect."<sup>20</sup>

In an essay published by *Damdaming Katoliko Para sa Teolohiya* for its journal *Hapag*, Gonzales noted that while the Church decrees that “bishops, priests, and religious must refrain from partisan politics and teaches that the laity and not the clergy ought to be at the forefront of the task to renew the political community ... some high-ranking bishops exempt themselves from these precepts.” One example was Manila Archbishop Jaime Cardinal Sin, who acted more as a political broker than a prudent moral teacher, Gonzales said.<sup>21</sup>

Gonzales pointed out that two decades after PCP II, “it remains unclear to what extent the hierarchical Church is a genuine democratizing force in society.”<sup>22</sup> So far, its role has been characterized as “pure power play,” he said, citing Church leaders’ reprised role in ousting President Estrada during the EDSA 2 “people power revolution” in 2001.<sup>23</sup>

“It remains unclear to what extent the hierarchical Church is a genuine democratizing force in society.”

In his essay, Gonzales observed that while the CBCP had issued pastoral letters that ranged from giving specific guidelines on the kind of candidates that the public should vote for, to encouraging lay participation and involvement in principled partisan politics, such as its pastoral statement on July 12, 2009, “it is striking to note that none of the pastoral actions encourage the laity to get involved in building, reforming, and strengthening political parties, which are necessary institutions in strong democracies.”

He added: “Strong and dialogical political parties will be more effective in the political education of the citizenry than the institutional Church. The practice of democratic politics is not one of the core competencies of the hierarchical Church, which attempts primarily to evangelize politics by teaching and preaching primarily for the transformation of the hearts of politicians, candidates, and voters.”

Cartagenas agrees with Gonzales’s observations, saying the Church’s default definition of political reform “revolves around the axis of clean, honest, and fair elections.” At best, the Church sees every election as “a ritual ... to harness all its institutional and human resources in voters’ education, poll watching, and monitoring the canvassing of votes. While this may indicate a commitment to democracy as a procedure, [it leaves much] to be desired in terms of substance and process.”<sup>24</sup>



## A CHURCH OF DOCUMENTS

Not only was its engagement in political transformation found wanting in substance, but its engagement to social justice was also spotty. Cartagenas referred to the Church's campaign on land reform, where the Church failed to seize the moment to advocate a genuine campaign during the time of former President Corazon Aquino. "Had the Church, which at that time was enjoying moral credibility unprecedented in Philippine history, done that, Mrs. Aquino might have been persuaded to seize the historical moment of choice as a *kairos* for social justice."

The Church sought to make up for this slack when it convened the National Rural Congress in 2008, the second of its kind since 1967, where the Church launched a nationwide consultation with farmers and rural people. In that congress, the Church resolved to campaign for the extension of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program with reforms.<sup>25</sup>

Except for this statement and "occasional yet heroic public witnessing of a very few bishops," Cartagenas pointed out that there was really "no serious and collective move on the part of Church leadership to re-examine its ties with the urban and rural landed class." Thus, "one could not help but infer that for the many in the church hierarchy, agrarian reform is just another poverty alleviation project."

One example was the case of the Sumilao farmers of Bukidnon, where only a few bishops—Manila Archbishop Gaudencio Rosales and Pabillo in particular—joined the farmers' campaign in claiming ownership of some 144 hectares of land. Pabillo said the Church merely "provided [a] voice for the farmers and used its influence for the good of the people."

Its campaign against graft and corruption was also hampered by a double standard—quick to condemn government but silent when it involved Church officials themselves. One instance was the incident in July 2006 when the Arroyo government gave sealed envelopes containing money during the CBCP's plenary. Others might have returned the money, but there was no collective stance to denounce the implicit bribery.

Even Church-based electoral groups, like the PPCRV and Namfrel, supposedly concrete manifestations of PCP II, had not been spared of internal strife, undermining their mandate and creating a chaotic mess. A year before the 2010 national polls, this journalist reported the infighting between Namfrel and PPCRV versus the CBCP-Nassa. The political play among the bishops, which was at its height during the Arroyo administration, caused the friction.<sup>26</sup>

The dynamics of the infighting changed a few months before the May 2010 polls, with the PPCRV finding itself at odds with Namfrel and Nassa this time. The PPCRV blocked the combined partnership of Namfrel and Nassa for accreditation as an election watchdog. The not-so-silent war broke out after PPCRV head Henrietta de Villa was asked to resign by Namfrel officials as concurrent Namfrel chair. It was a bitter parting. Senior Namfrel officials were wary of de Villa's role as member of the Comelec advisory body in the automation project, saying it could compromise Namfrel's impartiality as an election watchdog.<sup>27</sup>

The situation was downright bizarre. PPCRV and Namfrel share the same manpower for their election duties and responsibilities, with both relying on the Church's social action centers and volunteers to carry



out their mandate.

Perhaps one telling sign that the Church was slowly losing its flock was the EDSA 3 event in 2001 where the poor sought deliverance from former President Joseph Estrada, whom the Church helped oust. That crisis showed that the poor “have found an opium in Estrada. Religion is no longer their opium,” said political analyst Alex Magno in an interview at the time.<sup>28</sup> Sin, in an unprecedented move, apologized on behalf of the Church for neglecting the poor.

Quevedo, then the CBCP president, summed up the whole incident: “EDSA 3 demonstrated how little we have progressed toward the PCP II vision. For all the dioceses in the Philippines, the whole political crisis was a wake-up call.”

## PCP III?

In April 2011, on the 20th anniversary of PCP II, the CBCP commissioned several Catholic institutions to assess how its decrees had been observed and implemented.<sup>29</sup> But like the secrets of Fatima, the CBCP refused to share the results of the study.

We requested San Fernando Auxiliary Bishop Pablo David, in his capacity as head of the CBCP Research Office, for a copy of the study conducted by the UST Research Center but he referred us to CBCP president Cebu Archbishop Jose Palma. But in his e-mailed reply, David said “if your objective is really to find out what has been achieved in the dioceses among the objectives of PCP II, the research output may not be enough” as the “source of the information was basically the diocesan pastoral plans and what was written in them. A plan of course is just a plan. Whether the plans were implemented or not or the objectives of the plans were achieved is something else.”<sup>30</sup>

In the end, CBCP secretary-general Joselito Asis, on Palma’s behalf, flatly rejected our request, referring us to the previous reply of David.<sup>31</sup>

Given that 20 years had passed, has the PCP II served its purpose and outlived its relevance? Pabillo admitted that “there are still many issues” addressed in PCP II “that have yet to be implemented” but stressed that the expected change would take time to become a reality. Retired Tuguegarao Archbishop Diosdado Talamayan says change does not happen quickly. “After all, Rome was not made overnight.”<sup>32</sup> Legaspi agreed, although he said “the basic purpose of PCP II had been achieved. That is not bad anymore.”

The prelate said the current CBCP president might convene a third plenary council, depending on their appreciation of the current Philippine situation. But Legaspi would not be able to be part of the Church’s next journey, having retired in September 2012.

P a r t F o u r

C H A P T E R 14

THE TALE  
OF THE  
PECTORAL CROSS

TO SISTER MARIA RITA RAMA, A MEMBER OF THE SISTERS of the Divine Shepherd Congregation, it was the most harrowing and humiliating experience of her life. Interrogated by National Bureau of Investigation agents and questioned without the presence of a lawyer, the young nun was treated like a common criminal. The experience was so traumatic that she left the Bulacan-based congregation months later before Bishop Jose Oliveros issued his apology.

This incident with the man in red zucchetto illustrates the haughty demeanor of some of Christ's chosen disciples toward women. In an institution like the Church, where power is in the hands of men, such behavior remains unchecked.

Sadly, like the phenomenon of battered women, it also shows the submissive stance of female religious congregations—even the militant ones—to their bishops, and how they would try to keep secrets of wrongdoing within the family.

Sister Rita's tale of woe began in October 2010 when the Malolos chancery underwent a renovation that required the transfer of Oliveros's personal items from his room. In the hustle and bustle of the renovation, however, one expensive item went missing—a pectoral cross, one worn on the chest, amounting to P500,000.

A source familiar with the case said Oliveros had the pectoral cross made in anticipation of a promotion by the Vatican. At that time, the Vatican was ready to retire Cardinal and Cebu Archbishop Jose Vidal, who was already 79 years old. Apparently, Oliveros had gotten hold of information that he was a likely replacement.<sup>1</sup>

Like in most bishops' residences, two nuns, both members of the Divine Shepherd Congregation, were helping in the upkeep and doing household errands in Oliveros's official residence. These nuns prepared the bishops' food, cleaned the house, did the laundry, and attended to his other needs.

While awaiting word from the Vatican for Vidal's rightful successor, Oliveros sought to keep his expensive pectoral cross safe. What better way to keep it away from prying eyes and nimble hands than inside the safety of his own room?

His peace of mind was shattered when one day he could not find the pectoral cross in its usual hiding place. There was no sign of a break-in and no other valuables were missing. He immediately thought this was an inside job.



*Malolos Bishop Jose Oliveros. Photo by Jun Tizon*

The only suspects were the sisters who were staying with him. He confronted them, and his suspicion fell strongly on Sister Rita. It was she who coordinated the transfer of the bishop's belongings. The hapless nun professed her innocence but Oliveros was not convinced.

At one point, trying reverse psychology, Oliveros said he understood if Sister Rita was only tempted to take the pectoral cross. "*Alam ko, sa kahirapan, kaya mo nagawa 'yun* (You were only tempted to do it out of poverty)," he told her.

*"Alam ko, sa kahirapan, kaya mo nagawa 'yun (You were only tempted to do it out of poverty)."*

For the nun, it was like rubbing salt on the wound. She felt she was being stripped of her dignity. She may be poor in material wealth, but not in integrity.

The nun stood her ground. For Oliveros, it was time to take drastic action. Applying a scare tactic, Oliveros sought the help of the National Bureau of Investigation and had Sister Rita taken into custody for interrogation.

Her mug shot was taken "and the way she was questioned caused so much stress and degradation to the dignity of a religious sister," as the Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines pointed out.<sup>2</sup> Sister Rita's congregation sought help from the Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines (AMRSP).

## ‘TOOL FOR DEGRADATION’

The combative AMRSP, led by Sister Mary John Mananzan, was incensed by the way Sister Rita was treated. Convinced of the nun’s story, the AMRSP wrote Oliveros demanding that he apologize to the traumatized nun.

The way Sister Rita recounted her ordeal touched a raw nerve. “The details of the story struck and touched us, so much so that we feel compelled to send you this letter. Based on Sister Rita’s testimonial and written account, her dignity as a human person and more so as a servant of God and of the Church was greatly ravaged with the way you handled the situation,” the AMRSP said.

The group lamented that the expensive “lost” pectoral cross, “supposedly a symbol of love and understanding became a tool of degradation and dehumanization as experienced by Sister Rita ... Her humiliation was exacerbated by the stories that circulated involving her being ‘tempted’—stories that are coming from you as she alleged.”

The AMRSP said they wanted to hear Oliveros’s side of the story. But to the AMRSP, it was already crystal clear who should apologize. “The distress of Sister Rita is real enough for us to be convinced that as the Sisters of her Congregation had expressed to you, they deserve an apology from you and we hope that such unkind action that is occasioned by the loss of an expensive object may not happen again to anyone, much less to a religious sister who is trying her best to serve you and your local Church.”

In asking for an apology from Oliveros, the AMRSP said: “We are standing by Sister Rita and we hope that everything will be cleared soon, including her damaged name and personal dignity. As an association, we are always strong in our advocacy in defending human rights and this one is a case we can’t simply turn our back [on] because the one involved is a person who is one of our own—a woman religious.”

For good measure, they lectured Oliveros on how to treat women. “We regret [that] such incident happened and we hope that this would teach us a lesson that a person is a reflection of God’s dignity hence due respect shall be accorded to him/her regardless of gender, education, and status in life.”

The AMRSP letter was signed by its entire executive board, who are all Sisters. Copies of the letter were also sent to the Apostolic Nuncio and the CBCP president.

Oliveros would eventually find the lost pectoral cross, somehow remembering where he hid it. When some Church officials inquired about it, he casually replied: “*Nahanap ko na* (I’ve found it).”

It took some time before Oliveros issued his apology, and by then it was already too late for Sister Rita.

In a telephone interview, Superior General Mother Bernadette Mahomoc informed us that Sister Rita had left the Divine Shepherd Congregation in December 2011 and was now a lay person.<sup>3</sup>

“We regret [that] such incident happened and we hope that this would

teach us a lesson that a person is a reflection of God's dignity hence due respect shall be accorded to him/her regardless of gender, education, and status in life.”

When we asked her to fill in some details about the incident, Mahomoc was reluctant, saying, “we leave it up to God what had happened.”

We sought an interview with Sister Mananzan about the AMRSP letter, but we did not get any reply. We also sent letters to Sister Maria Imelda Mora, OSA (Order of St. Augustine), who was then a member of the AMRSP executive board and one of the signatories, but there was no response.

On February 16, 2012, Mahomoc said Oliveros issued his apology, at the founding anniversary of the Divine Shepherd Congregation but Sister Rita was no longer there to hear it personally. The apology came a month after the Vatican named former Jaro Archbishop Jose Palma as Vidal's successor.

## HIS VERSION OF THE STORY

Sought for his reaction, Oliveros confirmed that he had issued his apology not because he was at fault, but out of Christian duty. He insisted that he never considered Sister Rita a suspect, nor did he make an assault on her personal dignity as the AMRSP painted it.<sup>4</sup>

Giving his own account of the incident, Oliveros said he was at a hospital, recuperating after suffering from a freak accident while playing tennis, when the carpenters started the renovation of the chancery. Sister Rita was tasked to oversee the transfer of the bishop's personal belongings while the other nun had a different assignment.

When he returned to the chancery, he found out that the pectoral cross, which belonged to a shrine in Bulacan, was missing. He inquired with Sister Rita about the pectoral cross, but the nun was unable to explain what had happened. "We asked her who were the carpenters that helped transfer my things but she could not identify them."

A concerned lay parishioner offered help by asking the NBI to question Sister Rita. "She was never a suspect. I never considered her a suspect," Oliveros said. Still, the police questioned her and this rattled the sister more. Deeply troubled, she complained to her congregation.

Oliveros said he prayed fervently and soon enough, he found the missing pectoral cross. In a meeting with Sister Rita and her congregation, he sought to clear up the misunderstanding. The congregation, however, demanded a public apology.

Not wanting to further magnify the issue, Oliveros said he agreed to apologize—not publicly, since the public was not involved in the first place, but to the congregation and to the priests. He did so, not because he was guilty, but out of Christian charity.

To further show goodwill, Oliveros agreed to shoulder a two-week out-of-town sabbatical that Sister Rita took following the incident. He also offered to shoulder the cost of therapy or counseling for the nun if she desired. "If she had been wronged, I had apologized but there was no intention to hurt her."

All's well that ends well? Not quite.

After the incident, the congregation stopped sending nuns to the chancery to help with the errands and housekeeping. Now assisting the bishop are his priests.

Oliveros said he did not hold it against the congregation if they refused to help with the household chores. As with deep wounds, he knew this would take time to heal.

But this goes beyond Sister Rita and her congregation. At its core is a mindset crying for reform in the largely patriarchal Church.



## EPILOGUE

ON THE FIRST WORKING DAY OF 2013, OR 12 DAYS AFTER President Aquino signed the controversial Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act (RA 10354), spouses James and Lovely Imbong wasted no time in contesting the constitutionality of the new law before the Supreme Court. They hoped that the gods of Padre Faura would strike down the law which they said “mocks the nation’s Filipino culture.”<sup>1</sup>

While it appeared that the petition was a private initiative, the Church cast its large shadow. Representing the Imbongs was the family matriarch, lawyer Jo Aurea Imbong, the executive secretary of the legal office of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines and consultant of the CBCP’s Episcopal Commission on Family and Life and the Office on Women. She was a recipient of Church recognitions, including the Blessed Calungsod Pro-Life Award, conferred by the retired Cebu Cardinal Ricardo Vidal in 2004.

For the Catholic Church, the Supreme Court was its last hope in annulling the RH law, after the bishops’ political intervention in Congress miserably failed.

By some stroke of divine luck, the case was raffled off to Justice Jose Mendoza, who had close ties to the Catholic Church. Retired Tuguegarao Archbishop Diosdado Talamayan backed his nomination to the High Court. Mendoza has two brothers who are priests and he hails from Lipa City, the stronghold of vocal anti-RH critic Lipa Archbishop Ramon Arguelles.<sup>2</sup>

With majority of the SC justices comprised of appointees of former President Arroyo, Mendoza among them, the Catholic Church was pinning its hopes on the court as a new battleground in which it could seal its victory. Arroyo had been a faithful daughter of the Church and clamped down on the promotion of artificial birth-control methods during her nine-year administration. (So far, President Benigno Aquino III has four appointees in the SC—Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno, Justices Bienvenido Reyes, Estela Perlas Bernabe and Marvic Leonen—in the 15-man collegial body.)

Many political pundits view the passage of the RH bill as the start of the end of the Catholic Church’s political clout which had its Golden Age in the 1986 people power revolution and the years that followed. But Archbishop Oscar Cruz, former president of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, thought otherwise. He said the perceived Church influence in politics had been grossly exaggerated. For one, he pointed out that the Church was not solidly behind the 1986 people power that ousted President Marcos nor the EDSA 2 in 2001 which ousted Estrada. It was a one-man show by the late Manila Archbishop Jaime Cardinal Sin.<sup>3</sup>

But it appears that some of the bishops believed in their grossly exaggerated clout and used it whenever they could. After all, the RH bill was held hostage by the Church for 14 years.

## MIDTERM ELECTION

For the first time, under a popular president, the RH bill got an extra push. And the bishops decided to fight back.

In a midterm election where local elections get higher premium than the senatorial races, the bishops realized they had leverage: Why not use the May 2013 polls to their advantage? Local elections are highly personal and they have better chances of convincing congressional lawmakers to follow their dogma. Surely, there is no Catholic vote on a national level—it has not been proven in past elections—but in local races, their influence and clout cannot be underestimated.

A number of bishops issued warnings that they would not hesitate to use the pulpits in campaigning against those who favored the contentious law. This could spell trouble for some lawmakers in closely contested local races, where a few dozen votes could spell either victory or defeat.

Arguelles and Palawan Bishop Pedro Arigo, in separate interviews, confirmed that the CBCP decided to launch a one-on-one campaign with congressmen following a desperate plea from Antipolo Bishop Gabriel Reyes, chairman of the CBCP Episcopal Commission on Family and Life, to use their suasion on their respective district representatives. “It is a personal campaign aimed at telling our lawmakers [about] the lies behind the RH,” Arguelles said.

Before the vote on the second reading of the RH bill, Malolos Bishop Jose Oliveros said they were confident they had the numbers. “We have the upper hand based on our count,” Oliveros said.<sup>4</sup>

But the bishops totally misread the situation. Some of the congressmen whom the bishops thought were allies turned their back on the Church in the final hour.

Oliveros cited for example Bulacan Representative Victoria Sy Alvarado, who publicly announced that she would vote against the RH bill. “She said her vow before a Church gathering, inside a Church. And in the voting, she voted ‘yes,’” Oliveros said.

But politicians are politicians and faith sometimes takes the back seat when one’s political future is at stake.

Alvarado’s husband, Bulacan governor Wilhemino Alvarado, was seeking re-election in the midterm polls. The talk was that former governor and Liberal party member Joselito Mendoza, who was the representative for the third district, was supposedly aiming for a comeback but had been persuaded to back out from the gubernatorial race, to give Alvarado a free pass in retaining his post, Oliveros said. Thus it may be surmised that Alvarado’s change of heart on the RH bill was connected to the political future of her husband—a quid pro quo for an easy electoral victory.

Bishop Reyes also said on record that he personally knew of five lawmakers who were supposed to vote “no” but the Palace threatened to withhold their pork barrel (congressional funding allocation) if they would vote in favor of the Church.

Ultimately, political pragmatism decided the fate of the RH bill. Lawmakers knew which side of their bread was buttered—they needed the pork barrel to ensure their political survival. In the first place, the

Catholic Church drawing power on elections—even in local races—was suspect. Sure, they issue guidelines during elections, but it is not known whether Catholic voters consciously consider these on voting day.

## CHURCH WITHOUT SIN

Some Church leaders lament the fact that if Cardinal Sin would have been alive today, the RH bill would have remained in the freezer. This is highly debatable, however—surveys have shown that the majority of Filipinos support family planning programs despite the Church’s warning that it is “intrinsically evil.”

But Sin’s political instinct was spot on—and he used this to the hilt in shaping not only the course of history, but also national policies. In 1997, he led protest rallies against attempts by President Ferdinand Ramos to amend the Constitution. Sin was able to muster a mammoth crowd at the Luneta, forcing Ramos to beat a hasty retreat.

As early as October 2000, Sin had called for the resignation of President Joseph Estrada following allegations of corruption and incompetence. Three months later, Estrada was ousted, with Sin standing side by side with Chief Justice Hilario Davide in the oath-taking of the newly crowned Gloria Arroyo at the EDSA Shrine.

How about today’s Church’s leaders?

No one has matched Sin’s political clout. The likes of Novaliches Bishop Antonio Tobias, retired Infanta Bishop Julio Labayen, and retired Archbishop Oscar Cruz were vocal critics of Arroyo during her term, but they lacked the charisma and political astuteness of Sin. Except for Cruz, Tobias and Labayen have been relatively silent.

Those who were in a position to redefine the Church’s role in politics and society—the newly named Luis Antonio Cardinal Tagle of Manila and CBCP President Cebu Archbishop Jose Palma—did not have the political aggressiveness of Sin, as shown during the entire RH issue, Cruz said. “They were quiet. You could see that they were not proactive,” Cruz said.<sup>5</sup>

“Notice that it was the CBCP vice-president who issued the pastoral statement following the second reading on the RH. Why Villegas and not Palma?” Cruz added.

The Church also lost some of its political luster following the involvement of some of its bishops in scandals—such as the PCSO vehicle mess that prompted the recipient bishops to issue a public apology, and the envelope scandal during Arroyo’s time.

Is it time to dismiss the Church as a spent force? Not just yet.

The Church remained one of the most trusted institutions, based on a 2012 survey by EON Inc., a consultancy firm. The Church topped the list, with the academe a far second, based on the responses of 1,200 respondents nationwide. The Church got a 69.1 percent trusting, with the academe and media getting 45.1 percent and 32.3 percent respectively.

But there was a caveat. The survey stressed that in order to be trusted, the Church should be able to “maintain the separation between the Church and the state.”<sup>7</sup> Other plus points for the Church were its “propagation of the faith” and its clergy being “role models of holiness.”

The challenge for the Church is to maintain this trust, while remaining relevant in these changing times.

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- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, paragraph 45.9 page 30
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