

# A CONSISTENT ETHIC OF LIFE FOR PHILIPPINE CHURCH LEADERSHIP

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Philippine Church leadership has not always been consistent in responding to the signs of the times. On matters of social justice, the bishops have used methods consistent with Catholic social teaching (CST) principles. On issues that involve human sexuality and family life, some have used coercive approaches and have engaged in partisan politics. This was epitomized by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines' (CBCP) and some individual clerics' responses to the debates that surrounded the passing of the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act of 2013 (RH Law). These have led to the weakening of their prophetic voice and have caused divisions.

The celebration of 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines is an opportunity for renewal. It is in this context that I would like to propose Joseph Cardinal Bernardin's *consistent ethic of life* (CEL) as a moral vision that can help renew the Philippine Church leadership's way of socio-political engagement.

## THE CHURCH'S DUAL APPROACHES TO POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Charles Curran observes that the universal Church's teachings on social and sexual ethics appear to be different. The former tend to be "liberal," the latter "conservative."<sup>1</sup> In social

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<sup>1</sup> Charles E. Curran, "Official Catholic Social and Sexual Teachings: A Methodological Comparison," in *Readings in Moral Theology No. 8: Dialogue About Catholic Sexual Teaching*, eds. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, SJ (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 536-58

ethics, Church teaching is found to be biblical, communal, dynamic, and personal. Natural law is interpreted using the order of reason. Nature is not merely seen in terms of what is inscribed biologically and physically but includes the total complexity of human reality in all its relationships and potentials. Moral norms are derived from the prudent use of reason to understand moral obligations grounded in human experience. Nature, then, is not static but is dynamic, changing, and making new demands. What is “unnatural” is acting against what we know to be a true expression of what most fulfills human potential as grasped by reason reflecting on experience.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, Catholic teaching on bioethics and sexual ethics has not matched the development of Catholic social teaching. It still uses an order-of-nature interpretation of natural law that is deductive, physicalist, and authoritarian; scientific developments and the experience of the laity remain marginal.<sup>3</sup> When it comes to bioethics and sexual ethics, the Church speaks in terms of “the divine plan,” “the theology of creation,” the “theocratic law,” of what is “inscribed in the very being of man and woman,” of laws “inscribed in their persons and their union.”<sup>4</sup> From these, moral criteria for medical intervention can be “deduced.”<sup>5</sup> From these examples, it can be observed that the Church uses a deductive approach which shows little or no

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<sup>2</sup> Richard M. Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 239–40.

<sup>3</sup> Richard A. McCormick, “The Consistent Ethic of Life: Is There an Historical Soft Underbelly?” in *Consistent Ethic of Life*, ed. Thomas G. Fuechtmann (London: Sheed & Ward, 1988), 103. See also Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 239–40.

<sup>4</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, 1 October 1986, Vatican Archive, accessed 27 March 2019, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19861001\\_homosexual-persons\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html), nos. 1–7.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origins and on the Dignity of Procreation*, 22 February 1987, Vatican Archive, accessed 27 March 2019, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19870222\\_respect-for-human-life\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19870222_respect-for-human-life_en.html), Introduction, no. 3 and II.B.no. 7.

historical consciousness when it comes to bioethics and medical ethics.

In an essay, Eric Marcelo O. Genilo, SJ argues that Philippine Church leadership uses a parallel dual approach to political engagement.<sup>6</sup> On social issues, they use a “standard approach” in which the hierarchy, through the CBCP or individual bishops, cooperates with the country’s democratic institutions to promote good governance and challenge unjust social structures. It speaks out in the public sphere to decry the abuse of power, advance the common good, and defend the vulnerable, typically by publishing pastoral statements. Examples of important statements include those on the rights of indigenous peoples,<sup>7</sup> agrarian reform,<sup>8</sup> and the more recent one on extra-judicial killings.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, when the hierarchy perceives that Church teachings on family life and human sexuality are threatened, it uses an “extraordinary approach” to political engagement. Examples of this approach include: some Church leaders inappropriately participating in partisan politics by campaigning for and against certain candidates, using coercive methods, and even “weaponizing” the Eucharist. All these reflect an “ends justify the means” tactic that undermines the country’s democratic institutions.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Eric Marcelo O. Genilo, SJ “The Philippine Church and Politics: A Call for Consistency,” *Asian Horizons* 14, no. 4 (December 2020): 875. In 877–78, Genilo discusses the Church’s standard approach in detail.

<sup>7</sup> CBCP, “Your Brother’s Blood Cries out to Me from the Ground! (Gen4:10): On the Killing of Voiceless and Defenseless Lumads,” CBCP Online, September 11, 2015, <http://cbcponline.net/your-brothers-blood-cries-out-to-me-from-the-ground-gen410/>.

<sup>8</sup> Idem, “Moral Ethical Dimensions of Comprehensive Agrarian Reform,” CBCP Online, June 6, 2014, <http://cbcponline.net/moral-ethical-dimensions-of-the-comprehensive-agrarian-reform/>.

<sup>9</sup> Idem, “For I find no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies – oracle of the Lord God (Ezekiel 18:32),” CBCP Online, January 30, 2017, <http://cbcponline.net/for-i-find-no-pleasure-in-the-death-of-anyone-who-dies-oracle-of-the-lord-god-ezekiel-1832/>.

<sup>10</sup> Genilo, “The Philippine Church and Politics,” 878–80.

Such an approach was epitomized in the 2013 midterm elections. Following the passing of the RH Law in 2012 after a heated battle between the Church and the government, some bishops and parishes campaigned against candidates who supported the law whom they named as belonging to *Team Patay* (Death) and endorsed those against it whom they named as belonging to *Team Buhay* (Life).<sup>11</sup> Aside from partisan campaigning and name-calling, threats of excommunication against then-President Benigno Aquino III also surfaced together with the denial of communion to politicians.<sup>12</sup> Though the former was not made by the CBCP and the latter was never implemented, their mere mention elicited intense criticism. In these instances, it is striking that the CBCP did not issue any official statement rebuking individual clerics. Instead, then-CBCP President Bishop Nereo Odchimar of Tandag, Surigao del Sur only clarified in *Radio Veritas* that the CBCP did not make any threats of excommunication,<sup>13</sup> giving the impression that the bishops' body tolerated the abovementioned actions.

### **A “CATHOLIC” NATION?**

It is noteworthy that in an essay, Jose Mario C. Francisco, SJ argues, by analyzing a wealth of CBCP statements as well as through historical inquiries, that the Philippine bishops advance an image of the country as a “Catholic nation.” In this idealized vision,

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<sup>11</sup> Efren N. Padilla, “*Team Patay vs. Team Buhay: The New Inquisition?*” GMA News Online, last modified March 4, 2013, <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/27605/opinion/blogs/team-patay-vs-team-buhay-the-new-inquisition>.

<sup>12</sup> Andreo Calonzo and Jam Sisante, “CBCP head: Aquino might be excommunicated for contraceptive stance,” GMA News Online, last modified September 30, 2010, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/202332/cbcp-head-aquino-might-be-excommunicated-for-contraceptive-stance/story/>. See also David Dizon, “Parish drafts statement banning communion for RH backers,” ABS-CBN News, last modified February 17, 2011, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/-depth/02/17/11/catholic-parish-bans-communion-rh-supporters>.

<sup>13</sup> ABS-CBN News, “CBCP chief denies saying Aquino should be excommunicated,” ABS-CBN News, last modified October 1, 2010, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/nation/09/30/10/cbcp-chief-denies-saying-aquino-should-be-excommunicated? page=1>.

the “body politic” is conflated with the “body Catholic” such that being a Filipino means being Catholic and that being patriotic means supporting the Church; to adhere to Catholic moral teachings is consistent with being a democratic nation.<sup>14</sup> While religious and cultural diversity is recognized, the bishops’ moral appeals to conscience and shared values still come from a Catholic perspective.

A significant factor that contributed to the rise of this imagery is the singular but complex historical process of colonization starting in the sixteenth century. The similar geographical and linguistic frames introduced by both colonizers and missionaries served as foundations for the concurrent development of both communities and, thus, of the Catholic nation’s imagery. Even after the Philippines gained independence, such imagery persisted and was cultivated in CWO’s (Catholic Welfare Organization, the CBCP’s predecessor) and CBCP’s various statements.<sup>15</sup> This is evident in some of the latter’s statements during the public debates over the RH Law:

Even as we recognize the right of the government to enact laws, we also reiterate that there must be no separation between God and Man. We appeal to our legislators to state in the Bill in clear categorical terms that human life from the moment of conception is sacred. We appeal to our legislators to insure that the Bill recognizes, preserves, and safeguards freedom of conscience and religion. The Bill must inspire parents not only to be responsible but to be heroic in their God-given and State-recognized duty of parenting. Without these conditions, the Bill if enacted into law will separate our nation from Almighty God.”<sup>16</sup> (CBCP, Pastoral

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<sup>14</sup> Jose Mario C. Francisco, SJ “People of God, People of the Nation: Official Catholic Discourse on Nation and Nationalism,” *Philippine Studies* 62, no. 3-4 (2014): 341-375.

<sup>15</sup> Francisco, “People of God, People of the Nation,” 345, 347-60.

<sup>16</sup> CBCP, “Standing Up for the Gospel of Life: CBCP Pastoral Statement on Reproductive Health Bill,” CBCP Online, November 14, 2018, <https://cbcponline.net/standing-up-for-the-gospel-of-life/>.

## A CONSISTENT ETHIC OF LIFE FOR PHILIPPINE CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Statement on the RH Bill “Standing Up for the Gospel of Life,” 2008)

But such a spirit goes against the cherished and commonly shared cultural, religious, and moral values that are the bedrock and soul of our democratic and pluralist society. These values are enshrined in our Constitution and laws, namely: the dignity and worth of human life from the moment of conception; the family as the fundamental cell of society; the sacredness of marriage between man and woman; the primordial right of parents in the education of their children, and others.

We appeal to you, our Filipino brothers and sisters, to defend our commonly shared moral values and reject the Reproductive Health bill. Ignoring moral values is moral corruption, and moral corruption breeds corruption in public and private life. Its fruit is social decay and disintegration.<sup>17</sup> (CBCP, “Proclaim Life... In Season and Out of Season,” 2011).

In both statements, the bishops presume that everyone in the Philippines adheres to Church teaching on the sacredness of human life, conscience, and parenting, among others. Passing the Bill without meeting certain conditions would separate the Philippines from the Judeo-Christian God and would vitiate “commonly shared” values that are defined primarily, if not exclusively, in terms of Catholic faith and morality and that for the bishops serve as the foundation of the Philippine’s democratic society. These examples as well as the way some Church leaders acted during the RH Bill debates show that the imagery of a Catholic nation is clearly operative in the Philippine hierarchy’s extraordinary approach to political engagement.

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<sup>17</sup> CBCP, “Proclaim Life... In Season and Out of Season,” CBCP Online, July 22, 2011, <https://cbcponline.net/proclaim-life-in-season-and-out-of-season/>.

## THE CONSISTENT ETHIC OF LIFE

The CEL was advanced by then-Chicago Archbishop Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. He first spoke about it in his 1983 Gannon Lecture “A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American Catholic Dialogue” at Fordham. The cardinal linked together “right to life” issues (e.g., abortion, war, euthanasia, and capital punishment) with “quality of life” concerns (e.g., poverty, care for the vulnerable, and racism), the basis being dignity of the human person, the sanctity of human life, and, as a consequence, the personal and social responsibilities of protecting and preserving human life in all its stages.<sup>18</sup> Bernardin describes the CEL as a “moral vision,”<sup>19</sup> an “ethical argument sustaining that vision,”<sup>20</sup> and a “moral argument.”<sup>21</sup>

Bernardin’s original intent in advancing the CEL is to rule out contradictory attitudes and positions about human life:

Consistency means we cannot have it both ways: we cannot urge a compassionate society and vigorous public policy to protect the rights of the unborn and then argue that compassion and significant public programs on behalf of the needy undermine the moral fiber of the society or are beyond the proper scope of governmental responsibility.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, “A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American Catholic Dialogue” (Gannon Lecture, Fordham University, December 6, 1983), in Thomas Nairn, OFM, ed., *The Seamless Garment: Writings on the Consistent Ethic of Life* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 10–13. Hereafter referred to as SG with appropriate page numbers. The title of the specific address given by Bernardin, together with its nature, occasion, and place and date it was given, will be provided, if available, on the first time it is cited.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, “A Consistent Ethic of Life: Continuing the Dialogue” (William Wade Lecture Series, St. Louis University, March 11, 1984), in SG, 16–17.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, “Address to the Consistent Ethic of Life Conference” (Portland, OR, October 4, 1986), in SG, 120.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, “The Church’s Witness to Life” (Seattle University, March 2, 1986), in SG, 104.

<sup>22</sup> Bernardin, “A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American Catholic Dialogue,” 13.

## A CONSISTENT ETHIC OF LIFE FOR PHILIPPINE CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Having worked with people from both anti-abortion- and justice-related camps, Bernardin observed that one is met with considerable opposition from different political and ideological spectrums about the value of life. While one camp sees the clarity of the application of the principle prohibiting the direct taking of innocent human life in abortion, they argue that it is beyond the purview of the Church to apply it to matters of national security, such as in questions of war; conversely, others understand the potential of the principle in questions about war but see its application in the issue of abortion as an affront to private choice.<sup>23</sup> Bernardin asserts that the Catholic position on abortion demands that the Church and society seek to influence a “heroic social ethic.”<sup>24</sup> He writes:

If one contends, as we do, that the right of every fetus to be born should be protected by civil law and supported by civil consensus, then our moral, political, and economic responsibilities do not stop at the moment of birth. Those who defend the right to life of the weakest among us must be equally visible in support of the quality of life of the powerless among us: the old and the young, the hungry and the homeless, the undocumented immigrant and the unemployed worker.<sup>25</sup>

Yet even as the CEL strives to link different life issues together and rule out contradictory moral positions about the unique value of human life, the CEL does not ask everyone to do everything. Bernardin himself admits that “no one can do everything, and [that] the complexity of the various issues demands some specialization.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the CEL recognizes that each of these issues is different and that each has its own meaning and morality; thus, they should not be collapsed into one. As such,

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 12–13.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>26</sup> Bernardin, “A Consistent Ethic for Church and Society,” Annual Meeting of Diocesan Pro-Life Directors, Denver, CO, August 8, 1988, in SG, 175.



Bernardin clarifies that the problem of taking human life (e.g., through abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, and war) cannot be equated with the problem of promoting human dignity (e.g., through humane social policies). Each of these issues is distinct, increasingly complex, and deserves individual treatment, even though a CEL recognizes that the protection of human life and its promotion are moral questions that must be confronted as pieces of a larger pattern.<sup>27</sup>

This original intent of Bernardin leads us to another point that is more relevant for our present purposes. In advocating for a CEL, Bernardin sought to move the Church and the faithful away from a single-issue approach to politics. The cardinal cautions against single-issue voting as well as evaluating and selecting candidates only based on narrow self-interests or one issue. Instead, true to its linkage of right to life and quality of life issues, the CEL calls for the examination of the positions of office seekers and holders on both a full range of issues and their personal integrity, philosophy, and performance.<sup>28</sup>

The CEL can be likened to a “moral stance” that seeks comprehensiveness, consistency, and coherence in our moral outlook.<sup>29</sup> It seeks to be comprehensive by broadening our moral vision to include the full range of issues where human life and dignity are threatened; it refuses to exclude any issue that threatens the life and dignity of the human person. It also seeks consistency and coherence by arguing that our commitments as well as our methods and attitudes to pursue them are aligned with each other. It is often the case that we, individually and socially, are committed to something yet our actions are inconsistent with our commitments. Or, we could be committed to certain moral principles to inform and direct our behavior yet we are selective of when and where these principles apply. The CEL seeks to tie

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<sup>27</sup> Bernardin, “A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American Catholic Dialogue,” 11 and Bernardin, “A Consistent Ethic of Life: Continuing the Dialogue,” 17.

<sup>28</sup> Bernardin, “The Church’s Witness to Life,” 107–8 and Bernardin, “A Consistent Ethic for Church and Society,” in SG, 176–77.

<sup>29</sup> James J. Walter, “What Does Horizon Analysis Bring to the Consistent Ethic of Life?” in *The Consistent Ethic of Life: Assessing Its Reception and Relevance*, ed. Thomas Nairn, OFM (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 11–13.

## A CONSISTENT ETHIC OF LIFE FOR PHILIPPINE CHURCH LEADERSHIP

together attitude and doing, commitment and application so that our vision of moral experience would be adequate. Inconsistencies in stances and methods compromise the Church's overall witness to life. As Thomas A. Shannon aptly summarizes Bernardin's vision: "we cannot be schizophrenic in our moral approach to reality, nor can we simply address moral issues in an ad hoc fashion."<sup>30</sup>

### A CONSISTENT ETHIC OF LIFE FOR PHILIPPINE CHURCH LEADERSHIP

The RH Law debates wounded both the Catholic community and leadership. Both laity and hierarchy were divided into their stances and approaches. Official statements of the CBCP and doctrinally conservative lay groups rejected the bill in its entirety. Some bishops and laity, however, took a more constructive approach such as then Manila Archbishop Luis Antonio Cardinal Tagle who focused on promoting respect for life and avoided harsh criticisms of Bill's supporters, and Cagayan de Oro Archbishop Antonio Ledesma who actively promoted natural family planning as a viable option for married couples.<sup>31</sup> The aggressive and punitive approaches adopted by some of the hierarchy—whose voices tend to dominate the media—eroded the Church's authority and weakened its prophetic voice. While generally deferential to Church leaders, many Filipinos openly disagreed with and criticized them in an unprecedented way.<sup>32</sup>

The celebration of 500 of Christianity in the Philippines is an opportunity for Philippine Church leadership to recover from

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas A. Shannon, "An Overview of the Consistent Ethic of Life," in SG, 4.

<sup>31</sup> Eric Marcelo O. Genilo, "The Catholic Church and the Reproductive Health Bill Debate: The Philippine Experience," *Heythrop Journal* 55, no. 6 (2014): 1050.

<sup>32</sup> Eric Marcelo O. Genilo, "Epilogue: The Church of PCP II after the RH Bill Debate," in *The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II): Quo Vadis?* eds. Eric Marcelo O. Genilo, Agnes M. Brazal, and Daniel Franklin E. Pilario, CM (Quezon City, Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015), 175-78.

this and renew itself. The CEL may offer some valuable lessons as it seeks this path of renewal.

The most important lesson that Church leaders can learn from the CEL is consistency, especially in terms of method. Rather than having a dual approach, it behooves Church leadership to have a single, consistent, and comprehensive approach that brings together the best of both the standard and extraordinary approaches. Church leaders need to respect democratic institutions in their political engagements. At the same time, it also needs to do more.

To be fair, the Philippine bishops, as mentioned earlier, have not been silent about important social issues, such as the rights of indigenous peoples, land reform, and extrajudicial killings. However, Aloysius Lopez Cartagenas observes that “[c]ompared to the way archdioceses and dioceses are using almost all its doctrinal, juridical, liturgical, human and institutional resources to wage a campaign against the proponents of the Reproductive Health Law, their [Catholic hierarchy] advocacy for the agrarian program aimed at dismantling the feudal power structure in Philippine society has been minuscule.” Elsewhere, he also notes that aside from “passing mention in...pastoral letters or isolated advocacies by individual dioceses...”<sup>33</sup> Church leadership lacks a comprehensive framework in which bishops, as one body, can frame a synergy of socio-pastoral strategies to address power abuses.

While Cartagenas mentioned the issues of agrarian reform and power abuse, the same can be said about issues that threaten human life and dignity.<sup>34</sup> Just as Church leadership is willing to deploy all its resources in addressing family life and human sexuality issues, it should also do the same when addressing issues that threaten human life and dignity—while still respecting democratic processes—in order to be consistent and comprehensive.

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<sup>33</sup> Aloysius Lopez Cartagenas, *Becoming a “Leaven of Society”*: The Catholic Church & Philippine Politics in the Light of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2014), 32.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 53

## A CONSISTENT ETHIC OF LIFE FOR PHILIPPINE CHURCH LEADERSHIP

By consciously adopting a broader moral vision that sees issues that threaten human life and dignity as equally significant, though not necessarily urgent, the hierarchy can move from a single-issue politics in which it pours all its resources to take a hardline stance on one or several issues only, whether about sexuality, family, or not.<sup>35</sup> As Pope Francis pointed out, the Church should not be too “obsessed” with issues related to abortion, same-sex unions, and the use of artificial contraceptives. Otherwise, the Church’s moral edifice is likely to “fall like a house of cards.” He repeatedly stresses economic justice and care for the poor as one of the priorities that the Church should have and calls for a “new balance.”<sup>36</sup> For instance, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, the pope reiterates that the defense of the unborn must be “clear, firm and passionate” for what is at stake is the dignity of a human life which is always sacred and demands love. Nonetheless, he also insists that:

Equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection. We cannot uphold an ideal of holiness that would ignore injustice in a world where some revel, spend with abandon, and live only for the latest consumer goods, even as others look on from afar, living their entire lives in abject poverty.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> In his essay, Francisco described how Philippine Church leadership also became defensive about issues it perceived as undermining its interests, such as nationalism and state control of education. For more details, see Francisco, “People of God, People of the Nation,” 347-52.

<sup>36</sup> Antonio Spadaro, SJ, “A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis,” *America*, last modified September 30, 2013, <https://www.america magazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis>.

<sup>37</sup> Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation on the Call to Holiness in Today’s World (Gaudete et Exsultate)*, 19 March 2018, Vatican Archive, accessed 12 July 2018, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/pap-a-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20180319\\_gaudete-et-exsultate.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/pap-a-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html), 101-2.

During the RH Law debates, Philippine Church leadership was perceived to be obsessed with artificial contraception that its other contributions to Philippine society were forgotten. A CEL calls for Philippine Church leadership to be equally visible with all its resources wherever human life and dignity are threatened. Likewise, a CEL challenges the Philippine Church leadership's loose structure in which individual bishops address issues as they see fit. Adopting the CEL as a moral vision can help our Church leaders develop a united front and create a comprehensive framework of socio-pastoral strategies to systematically and consistently address various threats to human life.

Philippine Church leadership can also learn from the CEL as a rhetorical approach and Bernardin's own essentially dialogical, humble, and courageous style. The CEL was born out of Bernardin's desire to make cooperation possible between different camps and out of the pluralistic American milieu. For him, a continuing dialogue marked by a spirit of civility and mutual respect is necessary.<sup>38</sup> Given the challenge of the universal Church's diverging approaches to medical-sexual ethics on the one hand and social ethics on the other hand and its parallel reflection on Philippine Church leadership, such a kind of continuing dialogue is needed.

In this dialogue, we can learn from the CEL as rhetoric as Elisabeth Brinkmann, R.S.C.J. helpfully points out. The word "rhetoric" conjures up a host of pejorative meanings like pretentious words or empty talk—but this need not be so. Rhetoric fundamentally means the art of speaking well, "the essential skill and civic practice of political discourse." It is an "acquirable virtue" for becoming a certain kind of person with the traits necessary for good citizenship. As a civic virtue, then, rhetoric is "a set of skills and virtues necessary for fruitful public discussion of contentious issues." Indeed, Brinkmann suggests that rhetoric should be one of

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<sup>38</sup> Bernardin, "The Consistent Ethic of Life, Stage Two, 142.

the virtues and attendant practices indispensable for promoting a CEL.<sup>39</sup>

Bernardin himself was aware of the importance of rhetoric. For him, “substance and style” are closely related:

As we seek to shape and share the vision of a consistent ethic of life, I suggest a style governed by the following rule: We should maintain and clearly articulate our religious convictions but also maintain our civil courtesy. We should be vigorous in stating a case and attentive in hearing another’s case; we should test everyone’s logic but not question his or her motives.<sup>40</sup>

In short, not only what we say but *how* we say it is important. We must foster social respect and concern for all life. We must also raise the right questions. If Philippine Church leadership knows the right questions to raise and does so credibly, a space for people to engage each other respectfully can be created. As Bernardin likewise recognizes: “the Church’s social policy role is at least as important in *defining* key questions in the public debate as in *deciding* such questions.”<sup>41</sup> Brinkmann claims that this rhetorical dimension of a CEL is an asset that can help advance such an ethic both within the Church and within civil society if understood and used properly.<sup>42</sup>

Bernardin’s own rhetorical style which is essentially dialogical, humble, and courageous, always seeking to find common ground is also instructive. We must learn to listen to one another, especially those who hold different views. We must also learn to accept our limitations. Yet, we must also be courageous as we seek to address complex and controversial issues and as we

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<sup>39</sup> Elisabeth Brinkmann, RSCJ, “Rhetoric and the Consistent Ethic of Life: Some Ethical Considerations,” in *The Consistent Ethic of Life* ed. Thomas Nairn, O.F.M. (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 81-82.

<sup>40</sup> Bernardin, “A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American Catholic Dialogue,” 14.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Brinkmann, “Rhetoric and the Consistent Ethic of Life,” 82-83.

commit ourselves to dialogue especially when we submit our ideas for scrutiny.<sup>43</sup>

Instead of immediately looking for “conflict points,” perhaps Church leadership can look for “talking points” first. A hardline approach is unproductive because it closes any room of whatever moral influence Church leadership has as well as any compromise it can reach. Being open to dialogue may also help bishops see Philippine society as pluralistic and break away from the image of a “Catholic nation” imaginary they may have unwittingly developed and fostered because of the dominant position they had in society for a long time. It needs to accept that differences are legitimate. The Filipino’s deference to Church leaders does not mean that it will accept all of its pronouncements.<sup>44</sup> Developing rhetoric along the style of the CEL and Bernardin might give more credibility and amplify the voice of Philippine Church leadership as it seeks a path of renewal. Sometimes, seeking common ground and dialogue, indeed even just talking points, instead of seeking everyone’s agreement, is enough already.

Philippine Church leadership should also learn from those within its ranks who courageously raise their voices and lead actions against threats to human life and dignity. Compared to the RH Bill debates, Church leadership has not been very consistent and persistent in mobilizing action to address extra-judicial killings, leading to observations that it has remained silent.<sup>45</sup> Beyond issuing statements and sporadic actions, it would be fitting to learn from the examples of some leaders such as Lingayen-Dagupan Archbishop Socrates Villegas and Caloocan Bishop Pablo David who raised their voices against such killings and organized

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 89–92.

<sup>44</sup> Eric Marcelo O. Genilo, SJ “The Catholic Church and the Reproductive Health Bill Debate: The Philippine Experience,” *Heythrop Journal* 55 (2014): 1052.

<sup>45</sup> See for example: Paterno Esmaguél II, “Church silence on killings ‘media-perceived,’ cardinal says,” *Rappler*, last modified January 17, 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/158642-catholic-church-silence-killings-philippines-media-perceived-quevedo/>. See also Eleanor R. Dionisio, “Feeding faith-based dissent,” *JJCICSI*, last modified October 31, 2017, <https://jjcici.org.ph/feeding-faith-based-dissent/>.

grassroots actions to assist bereaved families, drug users, and their families amidst death threats.<sup>46</sup> Much can also be learned from priests who have spoken against these threats to human life such as Fr. Amado “Picx” Picardal, CSsR even after having a close call with possible would-be assassins.<sup>47</sup> A moral vision of a CEL can help the Church’s leadership not only to support but also sustain, advance, and expand such advocacies in order to be consistently present where human life and dignity are threatened and, in doing so, hopefully, regain the credibility of their prophetic voice.

These examples lead us to a final point. Adopting the CEL as a moral vision is not too far of a stretch. It is already lived out by some though not named as such. As Bernardin suggests, his vision is “both old and new.”<sup>48</sup> In seeking to adopt the CEL as a moral vision, it is not necessary to name it as such.<sup>49</sup> Instead, we can focus on the moral intuitions behind it without using its sophisticated theological language while also encouraging concrete actions so that such an ethic will become both familiar and helpful in our moral living. Towards this end, the examples of those who constantly stand where human life and dignity are threatened are instructive for our Church leaders.

### CONCLUSION

The prophetic voice of Philippine Church leadership has been significantly weakened by its inconsistent witness. Some of its members have spoken loudly and harshly about select issues while

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<sup>46</sup> Dionisio, “Feeding faith-based dissent” and Philippine Daily Inquirer, “Stop the killings, start the healing,” Inquirer.net, last modified November 7, 2017, <https://opinion.inquirer.net/108513/stop-killings-start-healing>.

<sup>47</sup> Jodesz Gavilan, “Activist priest recounts ‘close call’ with death squad,” Rappler, last modified August 27, 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/210477-amado-picardal-priest-threats-davao-death-squad/>. Fr. Picardal’s own account of the event can be found in his Web Journal at [https://amadopicardal.blogspot.com/2018/08/coming-down-mountain-evading-death-squad\\_26.html](https://amadopicardal.blogspot.com/2018/08/coming-down-mountain-evading-death-squad_26.html). His web journal also contains his criticism of the Duterte government’s war on drugs.

<sup>48</sup> Bernardin, Address to the Consistent Ethic of Life Conference,” Portland, Oregon, 4 October 1986 in SG, 117.

<sup>49</sup> Bernardin, “Consistent Ethic of Life, Stage Two,” 145.



remaining mute and not doing enough about other equally important issues that threaten human life and dignity. Referring to how political leadership in the Philippines does not reflect Jesus the Good Shepherd as the role model, Bishop Broderick S. Pabillo points out in a homily:

*Ganyan din sa simbahan. Kaya hindi nagsasalita sa mga kasamaan na nangyayari sa lipunan kahit na lantaran na ang pang-aapi sa mga mahihirap tulad ng sa kaso ng Drug War o sa kaso ng Red-tagging at pagpapatay sa progressive and active leaders of the people's organizations. Sad to say, we church leaders take refuge in silence. We are like watch dogs who have lost the courage to at least bark!*<sup>50</sup>

[It is the same with Church leadership. This is the reason why we do not speak about the evils happening even in society even if there is a blatant oppression of the poor such as in the Drug War and the Red-tagging and killing of progressive and active leaders of people's organizations. Sad to say, we church leaders take refuge in silence. We are like watchdogs who have lost the courage to at least bark.]

The call for a renewal of Philippine Church leadership is an urgent one as the Church continues to move forward. It does not only need to rediscover its prophetic voice; more importantly, it has to regain the credibility of that voice. Being courageously, humbly, and effectively present in all issues that affect human life and dignity rather than being selective and punitive in several issues would lend greater credibility to that prophetic and pastoral voice. Philippine Church leadership needs to be consistent in its

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<sup>50</sup> Broderick S. Pabillo, "Homily of Bishop Broderick S. Pabillo, Apostolic Administrator of Manila during Mass for the Opening of Jubilee Door of Minor Basilica and National Shrine of San Lorenzo Ruiz on April 25, 2021, at 10 am," Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Manila, April 26, 2021, <https://rcam.org/full-text-homily-of-bishop-broderick-s-pabillo-apostolic-administrator-of-manila-during-mass-for-the-opening-of-jubilee-door-of-minor-basilica-and-national-shrine-of-san-lorenzo-ruiz-on-april-25/>.

## A CONSISTENT ETHIC OF LIFE FOR PHILIPPINE CHURCH LEADERSHIP

engagement with socio-political issues. The task of finding a single and consistent approach is made more urgent as potentially-divisive issues such as legislation allowing abortion, divorce, and same-sex unions appear on the horizon after the passing of the RH Bill. The extraordinary yet unsuccessful endorsement of a specific presidential candidate by many Church leaders in the recent 2022 elections is a further impetus to examine the credibility of its prophetic and pastoral voice. While these issues and events do not threaten human life and dignity, the Church cannot venture on another campaign in the same inconsistent way it did before that will lead to a further erosion of its moral authority and prophetic voice.<sup>51</sup>

The celebration of 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines is a *Kairos* moment. While the hierarchy's moral positions about human life and dignity can be considered consistent, it needs to stop focusing on several issues and having inconsistent approaches. Consistency is key not only to what to stand for but how to stand for it. Hoping that the hierarchy will seize this *Kairos* moment, Bernardin's consistent ethic of life can offer a moral vision of wholeness, civility in dialogue, and coherence between commitments and approaches that they may stand up in a consistent, comprehensive, and Christ-like manner wherever human life and dignity are threatened.

**Anatoly Angelo Aseneta**

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<sup>51</sup> Genilo makes the same point at "Epilogue: The Church of PCP II after the RH Bill Debate," 182-83.