

Fight in the Philippines over contraception and family planning: “With the decision to wager all on the RH battle, the Church hierarchy’s credibility has been mortally wounded”

Autopsy of a Debacle: Clerical Extremists, Timid Liberals, and the RH Debate

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The bishops should have realized it was only a matter of time. The surveys were unanimous in chronicling a steady rise in the majority supporting family planning and government support for it. More and more from all classes had come to accept that family size had a direct bearing on poverty and that medical science provided them with the means to do something about it, if they had financial assistance. And the spread of plural sources of belief and ethics that came with secularization was eroding the Church’s claim to a monopoly on morality.

The Church hierarchy should have taken notice of the lessons of Spain, Ireland, and other parts of Europe, where hard-line resistance to contraception, divorce, and gay rights, coupled with clerical child abuse resulted in a crushing loss of credibility and influence, a trend that the Economist characterized as “the near-collapse of Catholicism in some of its heartlands.”

Staking Everything on the RH Fight

Instead, the bishops chose to make a do-or-die stand on contraception and family planning. The conservatives in the hierarchy made a virtue of what others saw as a sign of backwardness: that the country was one of the few remaining countries in Asia with no comprehensive government-supported family planning program. The same attitude of drawing perverse pride from what others saw as reactionary was exhibited in the case of divorce, where they proclaimed to one and all our being blessed as the only country in the world not to allow divorce.

Caught up in their shrill rhetoric, the bishops did not notice the movement of opinion among the silent majority of Catholics and the spread, among the middle class, of resentment of their political influence in what was supposed to be a secular state.

In the early years of the Congressional debate on family planning in the late 1990's, the bishops deployed the argument that artificial contraception was immoral because the only purpose of sex was to have children. This had, however, limited appeal, so they enlisted another argument, this one from the extreme left: that family planning was a tool promoted by the United States to keep third world populations down. Thus we had the incongruous spectacle of upper-class religious conservatives parading as anti-imperialists on the floor of the House of Representatives.

Outmaneuvered by the Women's Movement

For a couple of years, armed with this bastard ideological formula of "anti-imperialism" and anti-contraception, the alliance between the bishops, religious conservatives in the House, and Malacanang blocked any movement on the legislative front, even as the rest of the country moved forward. What broke the political stalemate was the women's movement, which, in the 2000s, reframed the issue as one of women's reproductive rights and health. Women had the right to space their children and determine how many children they had. Women had the right to protect their family's quality of life by limiting their offspring. Women had the right to family planning to preserve their health. It was a winning argument, one that was deployed with skill not only at the rational level but symbolically, through the strategic dissemination of the image of an all-male hierarchy and a predominantly male Congress controlling women's choices.

By the 15th Congress, the hierarchy and its allies in Congress were bereft of viable arguments and forced into pushing two related arguments that came across to the general public as outrageous or silly: that condoms and other contraceptives were "abortifacients," and that there was no conceptual or real difference between contraception and abortion. As one congressman from Manila put it, memorably, during the floor debates, "Contraception is abortion." By this time, the hierarchy's Woman in the Palace was gone, and with the new president declaring passage of the RH bill a priority, the Church defeat was sealed, though the bishops chose to go down fighting during the Senate and House plenary debates in 2012 and 2013.

The Silence of the Liberals

The liberals within the Church hierarchy probably saw the handwriting on the wall. They probably knew that although the measure might be defeated in the 15th Congress, the changing balance of forces at work in the nation would mean that the pro-RH side could only steadily gain in strength and eventually win. Yet they acquiesced in the conservatives' strategy of making the anti-RH struggle an apocalyptic battle into which the Church would throw in all its resources, much like Hitler did against the Soviet Union in Stalingrad in 1942.

The liberals could have preached moderation to their colleagues. They and the more liberal religious orders could have been more vocal in rationally discussing, if not conditionally favoring the bill, instead of leaving Fr. Joaquin Bernas as the solitary Catholic cleric doing this in public. They could have adopted a strategy of symbolic, as opposed to active, political opposition, quietly acquiescing in the passage of RH as part of a broader program of theological reform that would have brought Catholic doctrine up to speed on a whole range of ethical issues. Yet they chose to stay quiet and allowed the extremists to call the shots.

During the long RH debate, in fact, we had the interesting spectacle of priests and nuns who would come up to proponents of the bill to whisper their support for it and apologize for not being able to publicly declare this. Moral cowardice is maybe too strong a word for this behavior, but it certainly

was, to borrow from Kierkegaard, a case of “fear and trembling.”

A Setback Turns into a Rout

When RH became law, there was still a chance for the liberals to stem the erosion of Church credibility, by cautioning their colleagues from supporting the efforts of some die-hard lay people to get the Supreme Court to rule the law unconstitutional. But again, they deferred to the firebrands, who entertained the illusion that the appointees of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo would compromise the integrity of the court by backing their incredible proposition that contraception was abortion and was therefore unconstitutional. This misreading turned what was a serious setback into a rout.

With the decision to wager all on the RH battle, the Church hierarchy’s credibility has been mortally wounded, enabling the easier passage of divorce and other laws that will finally, finally, make the Philippines a normal secular nation-state. A reformed, liberal Roman Catholic Church that had come to terms with secular realities and enjoying renewed respect from society was at one point in time a possibility. It is much less likely now owing to pig-headed extremism among the dominant forces in the hierarchy coupled with timidity on the part of Church liberals. A more likely outcome is what the Economist describes as the Catholic condition in Europe: a “church...losing whatever remains of its grip on society at an accelerating pace.”

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P.S.

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