

Remembering the “progressive” Philippine Church

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The Philippine Catholic Church’s alleged conservatism throughout history is worth re-examining today as the country began its official commemoration of the 500-year anniversary of the arrival of Christianity in the Philippines on April 4, 2021—Easter Sunday. A study of Philippine Church History may reveal that while there is solid basis to brand the Church as “conservative” in certain areas, there were critical moments in history where the Church played a progressive role in the formation of the Philippine nation, especially during the Spanish Colonial Period.

As a teacher of history and world religions, I have often found it challenging to discuss topics related to Christianity in general, and Philippine Church history in particular. While most students recognize the significant role of the Church as a social institution in the Philippines, there is a great deal of ambivalence when it comes to appreciating its overall impact, due largely to the issues and controversies it got itself involved in in its 500-year history in the country. One of the most commonly cited issues against the Church is its alleged conservatism, especially in matters related to sexual ethics. Critics for example, note how the Catholic Church hierarchy opposed progressive legislation related to reproductive health and divorce, as well as its conservative stance on [homosexuality](#).

It was not only in sexual ethics that the Philippine Catholic Church is accused of conservatism by the public. Its critics today and in the past have repeatedly noted the Church’s aversion to progress by referring to its history during the [Spanish Colonial Period](#), which was further popularized in Jose Rizal’s two nationalist novels, *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*. The type of postwar nationalist education in the Philippines also reinforced this reputation of the Church in the Spanish Colonial Period, with textbooks like Teodoro Agoncillo’s “History of the Filipino People” (1960), which has been a canonical text for Philippine history education for the last six decades.

The origin of the Philippine Church’s fight for justice

While Christianity was first introduced to the Philippines in 1521 through the efforts of Ferdinand Magellan, Spanish conquest—and Christianisation—of the Philippines really began in 1565. Despite explicit orders from King Philip II of Spain for conquistadores to maintain friendly relations with the natives, the early conquest of the Philippines was wrought with violence and abuse. Spanish conquistadores blamed the natives for their treachery and resistance, but the friars pointed the finger at Spanish soldiers and officials. From the very beginning of the conquest, friars denounced the abuse, which include excessive taxation, forced labor, rice hoarding, and unjust warfare. Friars even denied sacramental absolution to Spanish conquistadores who were found guilty of such abuses.

The Church’s official stand on issues of justice and native rights were best articulated in the Synod of Manila in 1582. The synod was called by the first Bishop of the Philippines, Domingo de Salazar,

who himself was known for fighting for the rights of the natives in Mexico before being assigned to lead the Church in the Philippines. The synod discussed the obstacles to evangelisation and made pronouncements that were truly progressive given the context of that time. For example, the synod concluded that all persons of all races—including pagans—have certain natural rights, which cannot be taken away by the King or even the Pope. Not only did it denounce abuses by conquistadores, it also demanded that restitution be given to aggrieved natives. It also asserted that it is the right and duty of the clergy to call out injustices, and to deny sacraments to those who refuse to fulfil their obligations to the natives placed under their care.

Knowledge-production and works of charity under the Philippine Church

The Philippine Church's mission went beyond the fight for justice during the colonial period. A key part of the Church's efforts in evangelisation was the creation and management of institutions of charity such as hospitals, leprosariums and asylums. These institutions catered to the sick, the poor, prisoners and orphans, among others. The Leprosarium of San Lazaro (which was built in 1578) was even expanded to cater to Japanese Christian lepers who were expelled from Japan in 1632. It is currently known as San Lazaro Hospital, and is a referral facility for communicable diseases under the Department of Health.

The Church also led in innovation and knowledge production. Friars introduced large scale irrigation and introduced new crops from the Americas and Europe. They studied native languages and produced dictionaries and lexicons which proved essential in studying precolonial Philippine society. The Society of Jesus engaged in systematic observation of Philippine weather and earthquakes through the [Manila Observatory](#). It is also worth noting today that a Jesuit cartographer – Fr. Pedro Murillo Velarde, S.J. —made the first scientific map of the Philippines, *Carta Hydrographica y Chorographica de las Islas Filipinas*, in 1734, with the aid of Filipino engraver Nicolas dela Cruz Bagay. This fact is particularly important to the Philippines since it was [one of the maps used by the country in the case it filed against China](#) at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in 2013.

The Church was also primarily in charge of education in the Philippines throughout the Spanish Colonial Period, from primary education to higher education. While the curricula of some of these institutions may seem archaic by contemporary standards, the quality of education in colleges and universities in the country was arguably one of the best offered by colonisers of the time, as noted by historians such as Resil Mojares (2006) and Fr. John Schumacher, S.J. (1997). As I have discussed [elsewhere](#), these Catholic institutions of learning were also perceived to be a hotbed of radical ideas, since the knowledge and perspectives students acquired equipped them with the necessary skills to ask critical questions that could undermine colonial rule.

It was also members of the Philippine Church who first raised issues related to racism in the late 19th century. Filipino Secular priests led by Father Pedro Pelaez and Father Jose Burgos rallied Filipinos to the cause of secularization, and earned the praise and respect of progressive-thinking Spanish officials and Filipino reformists and revolutionaries, including Jose Rizal.

Learning from the past

The Philippine's celebration of the 500 years of Christianity this year provides a good opportunity for the Filipino people in general—and the Philippine Church in particular—to remember these instances when the Church played a progressive role in the country. While remaining a conservative voice on some issues, the Church has generally maintained its progressive stance when it comes to the issues that touch on social justice, charity and human dignity.

The Church also laid the foundation for the flourishing civil society the country enjoys today, and has relied on multiple times in the past to address the needs of the people and lobby against the abuses of the state. Its commitment to the welfare of the people has been seen throughout history through its mission stations in poor and [marginalized communities](#), its efforts alongside [farmers](#) for genuine land reform, its pronouncements [denouncing](#) the government's human rights violations, among many others. Despite all this though, I would argue that that more is being asked of the Philippine Church today given the contemporary circumstances.

First, I would argue that the Church—especially its leaders—needs to be more vocal and involved in Philippines politics. While the Church's aversion to politics is understandable given the controversies it has involved itself in in the past, the culture of violence and impunity empowered by the current administration necessitates more vocal opposition, especially from an institution that has championed human life and human rights since the very beginning of its history in the Philippines. While high-ranking officials of the Church have condemned the culture of violence in the country, they have hesitated in calling out the offices and personalities who are directly responsible for it, and those who are enabling it, such as President Duterte, the Philippine National Police leadership, and even the controversial National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC).

The Church should also have called the government out for other pandemic-related issues such as the latter's reliance on military solutions and lockdowns, inadequate economic assistance for the poor, and overall lack of strategy and leadership in handling the pandemic. I am disappointed, for example, that the Catholic Church's most vocal and defiant stand so far has been made against the decision of the national government to suspend [onsite religious services](#) and gatherings during the Holy Week.

Second, Church leaders today could and should emulate the example of the early friars and educate themselves more on complex social issues the countries face today, something some clerics failed to do during the Reproductive Health Bill debates. The progressive nature of the decisions in the 1582 Manila Synod for example, reflected not just the integrity of the Church, but also its accurate understanding of the native's needs and context. Bishops and clerics may do well to emulate such a feat by listening and engaging church members, so that their pronouncements and actions truly reflect the needs and aspirations of the people they serve.

Third, I also believe that the Church needs to play a big role in preparing Filipinos for the upcoming 2022 general elections. Without endorsing candidates, the Catholic Church hierarchy must go beyond the pulpit and maximize its resources—including universities, parochial schools, mission stations and church-based non-government organisations—to encourage the Filipino youth to vote, and to carefully craft guidelines and reflection points for voting, based on an accurate knowledge and critical reflection of the most pertinent issues the country needs to address. It might remind its flock for example, that the values of social justice, democracy, human rights and the dignity of men and women are non-negotiable, not only because they are part of Catholic Social Teaching, but also because the Philippine's identity as a country was built on those values as enshrined in its constitution.

Lastly, it would be good for the Church—its clergy and believers—to go beyond the commemoration of key events in Philippine Church history in its celebration this year. It would be timely for members of the Church to continually remind one another of its long tradition of fighting for the oppressed and caring for the poor and marginalized. The memory of the progressive Church is not one for triumphalism, but one that must be remembered and appreciated with humility, accompanied by a strong sense of responsibility.

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Franz Santos

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