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Regular Article

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Morality politics: Drug use and the Catholic Church in the Philippines

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Abstract: This article traces the trajectory of the Catholic Church’s discourses on drug use in the Philippines since the first time a statement was made in the 1970s. By drawing on official statements by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), it argues that shifts in emphasis have taken place through the years: the *destruction of the youth*, *attack on human dignity*, and then *social moral decay*. Collectively, they emanate from an institutional concern for peace and order. But they also reflect the moral panic around drug use that has been around for decades, which, on several occasions, Filipino politicians, including President Duterte, have mobilized as a populist trope. In this way, the article historicizes the Catholic Church’s official statements and frames them in terms of morality politics through which values and corresponding behavior are defined by an influential institution on behalf of society whose morality it deems is in decline. The article ends by reflecting on the recent statements by the CBCP that invoke compassion and redemption.

Keywords: drugs, Catholic Church, morality politics, moral politics, the Philippines, Duterte

1 Introduction

In its wake, more than 5,000 have been killed in Duterte’s war on drugs in the Philippines.¹ Police operations, which supposedly involve only the arrest and rehabilitation of drug users, have left many killed in their own homes. The work of the Ateneo Policy Center shows that most of the victims were men working as construction workers, garbage collectors, and tricycle drivers in urban poor neighborhoods.² In effect, the campaign has been a war on the poor that has attracted global attention for its human rights violations. According to some legal experts, these violations already constitute crimes against humanity.³ Yet the Philippine government claims that it has been successful in clearing thousands of local villages of illegal drugs.

Implicated in the campaign are leaders of the Catholic Church in the country. Across all levels of the Catholic hierarchy, many have resisted the war on drugs in public. Not surprisingly, the government has not been sympathetic in response. In fact, four bishops have been accused of sedition.⁴ But in spite of

1 Philippine Information Agency, “#RealNumbersPH.”

2 Drug Archive Philippines, “Drug killings.”

3 Gallagher et al., “Failing to fulfil.”

4 Macairan, “Bishops on sedition.”

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these accusations, and even death threats, these clergy have confessed their fidelity to their calling as “God’s shepherds,” even asserting that “we will not be discouraged.”⁵

And yet the response of Catholic leaders to the war on drugs has also been fragmented. While certain bishops have resisted the campaign, other influential ones have been remarkably silent.⁶ Moreover, there are priests and other religious leaders who actively support the war on drugs on the premise that it is divinely ordained.⁷ Direct encounters with victims of the war on drugs and theological predispositions are potential explanations for differing viewpoints among religious leaders and their respective congregations.⁸

There is, however, a wider and more dynamic backdrop to the Catholic Church’s attitudes toward drug abuse in the Philippines. Its resistance, for one, is not a recent development and has taken on different nuances over time. As the rest of this article will demonstrate, the Church’s attitudes to substance abuse have emphasized different concerns over time. From the 1970s to the present, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) has repeatedly tackled drug use, mentioning the topic no less than 20 times and devoting two pastoral letters to it. From these official statements, what can we learn about the moral discourses about drug use in the Philippines? And conversely, what can we learn about the (evolving) place of the Church in Philippine politics in this discourse?

This article traces the trajectory of the Catholic Church’s discourses on drug use in the Philippines since the first time a statement was made in the 1970s. By drawing on official statements by the CBCP, this article argues that shifts in emphasis have taken place through the years: the *destruction of the youth*, *attack on human dignity*, and then *social moral decay*. Collectively, they emanate from an institutional concern for peace and order. But they also reflect the moral panic around drug use that has been around for decades, which, on several occasions, Filipino politicians, including President Duterte, have mobilized as a populist trope. In this way, the article historicizes the Catholic Church’s official statements and frames them in terms of morality politics through which values and corresponding behavior are defined by an influential institution on behalf of society whose morality it deems is in decline. The moral valence of these statements lies in the sociopolitical contexts in which they are proclaimed. It also lies in the authority of what Howard Becker long ago referred to as moral entrepreneurs who identify on behalf of society its social evils and their solutions.⁹ In Philippine society, the most influential among them are religious leaders and their allies in policy making. The influence of these actors is undeniable, especially when it comes to morally controversial matters such as the use of contraceptives and gender equality.¹⁰ This is why morality politics at its core is the politics of sin.¹¹ The article ends by reflecting on recent statements by the CBCP that draw on compassion and redemption. Although seminal, this theme potentially pushes for a view of drug policy guided by human dignity.¹²

Our study draws on the pastoral letters and statements released by the CBCP. Doing so allows us to identify the shifts and historicize them in relation to the social and political contexts of drug wars in the Philippines (and elsewhere). It also problematizes the role of the Church in politics. This approach is inspired by Francisco’s critical work on official church documents that assert the Christian identity of the Filipino nation.¹³ To this end, we gathered all references to drugs and analyzed their content. The first

5 What might account for this conviction? One reason is the prophetic role Catholic leaders have historically played in Philippine society. This prophetic role, one oriented against injustice, was crucial in the restoration of democracy in the 1980s (Youngblood, “Marcos against the church”). This prophetic role, however, is not only theological. It is also deeply political, given the official Catholic documents that define Filipinos as the people of God, which then inform the Church’s attitudes toward public policy (Francisco, “People of God”). Thus, over time, Catholic leaders have used their resources and influence to challenge controversial legislative measures in favor of divorce and what was then called the Reproductive Health Bill (Bautista, “Church and state”).

6 Willis, “Catholic rebels.”

7 Affatato, “Duterte God-avenger”; Esmaguil II, “Why Filipinos.”

8 Cornelio and Medina, “Christianity and Duterte.”

9 Becker, “Outsiders.”

10 Leviste, “In the name of fathers”; Bautista, “Church and state”; Cornelio and Dagle, “Weaponising.”

11 Meier, “Politics of sin.”

12 Buchhandler-Raphael, “Drugs, dignity.”

13 Francisco, “People of God.”

reference to illegal drugs appeared in 1971. From that time to the present, we were able to collect a total of 304 pastoral statements. The ensuing discussion puts forward themes we have identified over time. We then relate them to contemporary developments by relying on news articles about drugs, drug-related laws, and policy formulations.

2 Drug use and morality politics

Around the world, drug abuse, alongside abortion, same-sex marriage, and the death penalty, is one of the most emotionally charged policy concerns. It attracts attention from a diverse group of experts including psychologists, educators, medical doctors, and public health professionals. In this article, we focus our attention on religion because arguably the most vocal reaction comes from it, which is expected, given that at the heart of the debates is a validation of what is right and wrong.¹⁴ In other words, without denying the influence of other social institutions like education, religion plays a crucial role in defining the morality of drug use. One reason is that religious beliefs “affect the ways in which people understand drug use and abuse, what they think should be done about it, and whether they themselves use illicit drugs.”¹⁵ Among psychologists, for example, extensive scholarly work has been done on the protective function of religious belief and practice against drug use.¹⁶ Research also shows that religious activities, depending on culture, are helpful in treatment and rehabilitation.¹⁷

But beyond the individual, religion is invested in defining and defending its moral worldviews in society. Drug abuse and the way the state confronts it are moral concerns that attract reactions from religious leaders. Debates happen in different countries, although it is in the Global South where they are more contentious because of the polarizing influence of religious institutions in policy making.¹⁸ For example, how religious leaders approach the morality of drugs and drug abuse largely shape whether they would push for libertarian, medical, or criminal interventions.¹⁹ Libertarian policies are less restrictive as they favor regulation and taxation, while medical ones focus on therapy. Criminal policies are restrictive, giving emphasis on incapacitation and deterrence.

Among religious leaders, a common attitude toward drugs and drug abuse is outright rejection. Based on their work in Brazil, Lopes and Costa argue that religious leaders magnify the moral panic derived from legal and medical prohibitions against illegal drugs.²⁰ Their Evangelical and Pentecostal informants, for example, readily equate drug use with sin and the influence of evil spirits. Inspired by their religious convictions, these religious leaders have set up interventions providing treatment, rehabilitation, and pastoral guidance. By contrast, the work of Cornelio and Medina on religious leaders in the Philippines reveals a different set of responses.²¹ While many of the religious leaders they interviewed also invoked sin and evil in their statements about drug use, their pastoral response varied. Convinced that drug dependency was irreversible, some pastors dismissed any ministry with them. Others, however, have taken on a law enforcement role by partnering with local policy officers to identify drug users in the community. Regardless of the differences, these Filipino religious leaders, like their Brazilian counterparts, echoed the state-sanctioned assertion that drug users are criminals. They are, in other

¹⁴ Mooney, “Politics of morality policy.” Even in places where religious involvement in politics is tightly governed, religious organizations find it compelling to confront moral issues. Such has been the case in Singapore, for example, where conservative Christian groups visibly reacted to gambling and gender equality (Tan, “Keeping God in place.”).

¹⁵ Courtwright, “Morality, religion, drug use,” 231.

¹⁶ Sanchez et al., “Religiosity.”

¹⁷ Hechanova et al., “Development of community interventions.”

¹⁸ Pew Research, “What’s morally acceptable.”

¹⁹ Courtwright, “Morality, religion, drug use.”

²⁰ Lopes and Costa, “Drugs and religion.”

²¹ Cornelio and Medina, “Christianity and Duterte.”

words, elements that ruin peace and order in the neighborhood. In this sense, religion has played a role in intensifying moral panic and the overall public support for anticriminality.²²

Such role demonstrates the ability of religion to turn “the drug question into both a public issue and a religious one.”²³ In the name of peace and order, religious institutions become at once extensions and validations of the state. This is because religion, especially dominant ones in a given society, has the ability to ideologically reframe the struggle for social order as a holy war for the nation. Christian nationalism in the United States is an example of how conservative Christianity has sacralized racist policies against immigrants and drug dependents.²⁴

Scholars have thus called for the judicious role of religious actors in defining the common good.²⁵ Patrick Riordan, an Irish Jesuit, offers a way forward for thinking about the killings that accompany the contemporary war on drugs in the Philippines.²⁶ Using the principles of the common good, a government’s options must be weighed against the state of justice and the gravity of drug abuse and criminality in the country. In his view, while there may be contextual reasons that might excuse the use of force in the campaign against drug users, they do not justify these actions.

But other priests and scholars would disagree with this position. For Alexander Lucie-Smith, a Catholic priest, the only viable option is to end the War on Drugs altogether. In an essay that challenges Pope Francis himself, Lucie-Smith (2013) calls instead for the legalization, regulation, and taxation of drugs on the grounds that these substances are already available anyway and that the war on drugs has failed “to stop anyone who wants drugs accessing them.”²⁷ Using income generated from tax, education, and treatment, instead of criminalization, are in the long run more effective in the Latin American context. This disagreement between Pope Francis and Fr Lucie-Smith exemplifies the fundamental differences between the former’s theology of the people and the latter’s liberation theology.²⁸ While both are concerned about people’s situation, they have different moral readings of social issues, which ultimately inform how drug abuse is to be addressed as a policy matter. In his various statements, Pope Francis has recognized the need for both tough laws and social programs, so that drug dependents may become functional members of society. By contrast, Fr Lucie-Smith calls for an end to the criminalization of drug use altogether.

This scholarly overview thus far demonstrates the complex relationship between religion and drug use. One reason is that religion provides the institutional and moral resources in weighing the acceptability of policies in view of the common good. This is why scholars, for example, have called on citizens to listen to and learn from other religious views in pursuit of a “just society.”²⁹ This process, however, is difficult, emotionally charged, and consequential. Religious leaders and the institutions they represent constitute a segment of society that maneuvers to influence policy, legislation, or government action for the sake of their values (or nonnegotiable principles). This conviction is what separates morality policies from nonmorality policies. How drug abuse must be characterized and addressed based on fundamental religious notions of right and wrong is an example of a “morality policy.”³⁰ In this light, to win morality policies involves morality politics, which refers to the political struggle in which values, instead of scarce resources, are redistributed in society. Put differently, morality politics is about the “politics of sin,” whose ultimate objective is the legislation of moral acceptability.³¹ While religious actors are deeply invested in this political struggle, other institutions especially psychology and the medical field can also challenge moral assumptions.

²² Curato, “Politics of anxiety”; Holmes, “Dark side of electoralism.”

²³ Lopes and Costa, “Drugs and religion,” 8.

²⁴ Robbins and Crockett, “Doing theology.”

²⁵ Riordan, “Philippine common goods”; Sandel, “Justice”; LaFont, “Religion and public sphere.”

²⁶ Riordan, “Philippine common goods.”

²⁷ Lucie-Smith, “I disagree.”

²⁸ Mott, “Love the prisoner.”

²⁹ Sandel, “Justice,” 269.

³⁰ Mooney, “Politics of morality policy,” 675.

³¹ Meier, “Drugs, sex, rock, and roll,” 681.

Its consequences on social and public life are evident. For one, morality politics tends to disregard evidence-based research. In his theory of morality politics, Meier contends that morality policies are “poorly designed” because of the “lack of expertise and analysis.”³² At the same time, he argues that morality policies tend to only increase the cost of committing the “sin”, as it were, without regard for inelastic demand on the part of certain segments in society. Drug dependence is an example. Furthermore, morality politics creates a division, at least at a discursive level, between a desirable group and an undesirable other in a society. The discursive distinction between drug dependents and law-abiding members of society is an example. Although Kusaka uses it in a different manner, we take inspiration from his work on “moral politics” in the Philippines. In his landmark text, the struggle between the middle class and the lower classes is based on education and decency. This “moral politics” is about the hegemonic struggle to engender class-based divisions between “good” and “evil”.³³ Building on this work, we propose to also consider how moral resources found in religion affirm these divisions (with respect to drugs, in particular).

How exactly does it happen? In a contentious manner, religious entities steer the process of moralization through which “preferences are converted into values, both in individual lives and at the level of culture.”³⁴ It is this process of moralization that this study interrogates by taking note of the shifts that have taken place over time as far as the Catholic Church is concerned in relation to drug abuse in the Philippines. Through its official documents read across all parishes in the country, the Catholic Church serves as an influential agent of moralization in society.³⁵ It is through these statements that it engages in morality politics. If there is one observation that becomes clear from these documents, it is that the official view of the Catholic Church on substance abuse was never static.

Our research contributes to the literature as follows:

- First, these transitions challenge the assumption about morality politics that it is devoid of technocratic or rational thought upon which evidence-based policy making rests.³⁶ Hence, while our study suggests that the Catholic Church has been partly responsible for framing drug use in the Philippines as a perilous moral issue, more recent developments demonstrate that it is capable of reorienting the drug discourse in ways that recognize dignity by rejecting the hardline stance of the state.³⁷
- Second, we show how religious entities are moral entrepreneurs deeply involved in demarcating the line between good forces and the evil opponents in relation to drug use.³⁸ Foregrounding the role of religion is how we are advancing Kusaka’s work on moral politics.³⁹ Specifically, social demarcations are not only between civil society groups, classes, and the political parties or figures that have their loyalties. As the succeeding sections will spell out, the war on drugs in the Philippines has drawn a line between drug users and their victims.⁴⁰ Religious leaders are effective moral agents who reinforce stigma against specific groups such as drug users. This is why states find it advantageous if they could coopt religious leaders to lend their moral credibility to antidrug campaigns.⁴¹

³² Ibid., 686.

³³ Kusaka, “Moral politics,” 1.

³⁴ Rozin, “Process,” 218.

³⁵ How influential the Catholic Church on people’s choices is another matter, of course. Cornelio’s (“Being Catholic”; “Young people”; “Religious freedom”) work on reflexive spirituality and lived religion is instructive in this regard.

³⁶ Meier, “Drugs, sex, rock, and roll.”

³⁷ Cartagenas, “Religion and politics.”

³⁸ Becker, “Outsiders.”

³⁹ Kusaka, “Moral politics.”

⁴⁰ Cornelio and Medina, “Christianity and Duterte.”

⁴¹ Simangan, “‘War on drugs’ as genocide.”

3 Catholic discourses on drug use in the Philippines

In what follows, we draw on pastoral statements released by the CBCP on drug use in the Philippines. We collected every pastoral statement from the 1970s to the present and culled any background information related to these matters. In analyzing these documents, we were guided by the following questions: *How did the Catholic Church frame the drug situation in the Philippines? And what interventions did they propose, if any?* We argue that three themes progressively emerged over time: the *destruction of the youth*, *attack on human dignity*, and then *social moral decay*. While the chronological boundaries of this progression are not precise, we can nonetheless locate them in periods with specific political contexts.

3.1 The destruction of the youth (early 1970s)

Based on our review of all publicly available pastoral letters since the CBCP's inception in the 1940s, the first references to drugs were in the year 1971.⁴² In a letter dated February 20, 1971, and prefaced by a warning that “we live in critical times,” the bishops discussed the “urgent problems of our nation,” numbering among them a concern among young people. In a subtle rebuke of the rising activism at the time, the bishops “sympathize with their impatient zeal for change but we ask them to be at all times responsible in their reforming activism.” They went on to describe drugs as an “evil” alongside pornography:

The interests of students these days are not all centered, unfortunately, on redressing the ills of society. Drug addiction is on the rise. So are filthy movies and pornography. These are evils that erode most insidiously, the moral fiber of our people. Do we – and our students especially – see them in this light?

In another letter dated July 8, 1971, the bishops reiterated their concern about the “most grievous social and political problems that affect our whole country in these stormy times of widespread unrest and contestations.” Although the bishops referenced the political crisis, they highlighted the primacy of “salvation of souls” among their apostolic concerns, and thus they lament the “decline of the interior life.” Alongside the “the cult of permissiveness, the creeping poison of pornography in movies, magazines and the other media of social communication,” the bishops once again denounced drug addiction, linking it to spiritual corruption:

We also note with grief the rampant addiction to drugs especially among our youth. We shudder to think of the consequences of this evil which can destroy not only physical life but above all the moral and spiritual.

These themes would find a more forceful elaboration early the following year, when the bishops released a pastoral letter entitled “Statement on Drug Abuse.” Dated January 29, 1972, the letter began by repeating an expression of grief over the “rapid spread among our youth of the use of narcotics,” before proceeding with a discussion on drugs. On marijuana, for instance, the bishops claimed:

There are those who regard marijuana as a “mild hallucinogen,” a “relatively mild intoxicant with short-lived effects,” “no more harmful than tobacco or alcohol.” These statements were “countered by reports of permanent brain damage among long term users in countries where there is no ban”[...] We are in the tropics. Drugs from plants raised during the dry season in the fields surely can be more potent than those produced by well-watered plants in pots or in the fields during the wet season.

⁴² The statements are available online at <http://cbcponline.net/list-of-pastoral-statements/>.

The statement ascribed the highest culpability on the drug producers and traffickers. They were considered “saboteurs of the country” for destroying the lives of young people who have become “mental and physical wrecks” beyond redemption:

Because of the effects of drugs on our youth, planters of marijuana, producers of other hallucinogenic drugs, dealers of the same and those who smuggle them into the country should be considered as saboteurs of the country, worse than traitors. For a betrayed country with a citizenry healthy and strong in mind and body can easily recover dignity and honor. But a country whose youths are mental and physical wrecks will be hopelessly doomed to ignominy unredeemable until, if that is possible, a new and strong breed will rise up from the ruins. These are the worst saboteurs and are worthy of the highest punishments. For they destroy the youth, the hope of the land.

Noticeable here is the conflation between youth and the image of the country whose future was being undermined by drug abuse. To read this conflation is not surprising because the Catholic claim to the nation is evident in many of the writings of bishops in the Philippines.⁴³ The irony, however, was that young people themselves became the target of the Church’s criticism because of their activism. Indeed the 1970s was a pivotal period for youth activism. Writing in the late 1960s, the anthropologist F. Landa Jocano observed that the “youth in the Philippines are becoming to be restive,” as evidenced by the widely reported student protests of the time.⁴⁴ The bishops’ statement conflates anticolonial activism with drug use. In their eyes, the youth of the 1970s were very much accountable for succumbing to the Western lifestyle that celebrated hedonism, without realizing the destruction it inflicted on themselves. The youth, who ought to be redeemed from drug use, were also the adversary.

And we cannot consider as patriots, even activists sponsoring truly good and just causes, if through curiosity and defiance against the Establishment they break the narcotic laws and thus prepare themselves for a slavery worse than the colonialism and tyranny they clamor and demonstrate against. But we cannot understand our youth who abhor anything which smacks of colonial mentality yet imitate their counterparts across the ocean who have initiated this vice besides the growing, not grooming of their hair. But the fact is they do use drugs. They ought likewise to detest them, if they are to be consistent. Let us save the country’s dignity and honor even against their injudicious will.

3.2 Attack on human dignity (late 1990s)

From then until the 1980s, drug use as an issue hibernated in the bishops’ consciousness. Throughout the rest of the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos (1973–1986), the CBCP issued 46 pastoral letters without any reference to drugs. During the time of Corazon Aquino (1986–1992) who took over from Marcos after the EDSA Revolution, 28 pastoral letters were issued but none ever mentioned drugs. Likely, this interlude was influenced by the lack of political attention to substance abuse.⁴⁵ Instead, the state turned its attention on other hot button issues like the death penalty and reproductive health. Condom use was heavily resisted, for example.

In the late 1990s, however, drugs would again resurface in the episcopal discourse. While the youth remained in the discussions, drug use would be framed as part of a broader argument: they are an affront to human life and dignity. In “A Pastoral Letter on the Drug Crisis” dated July 10, 1997, the bishops began their statement as follows:

Today never has our country been menaced so dangerously and seriously by a health and moral crisis since AIDS exploded into our national consciousness. And the name of the crisis is Drugs, dangerous illegal, addictive drugs[...] Already more than 1.5 million Filipinos are users of illegal drugs. The youth are especially hard hit. They are the greatest number of drug users. Among them are more than 350,000 high school students, at the most impressionable period of their lives, threatened by an addiction the horrendous consequences of which they seem to ignore – until life itself is endangered.

⁴³ Francisco, “People of God.”

⁴⁴ Jocano, “Youth in changing society,” 73.

⁴⁵ Lasco, “Drug wars as populist tropes.”

The pastoral letter would once again highlight concern for young people. It referenced the newly amended Catechism for Filipino Catholics, which included the following passage among the “particular offenses against life”:

Perhaps the most widespread abuse in our country against physical well-being are the common “vices” of alcohol and drug abuse, and to a less intensive degree, smoking. Medical studies have proven the serious injury in terms of physical harm and addiction, and psychological and social difficulties and dependence, which these vices can cause. The quality of life – and sometimes life itself – of both the users and their family and close friends suffers greatly. More culpable still are drug dealers and pushers who, for the sake of money, care nothing about drawing others, especially innocent youth, into addictive dependency that ruins their very lives.

The statement concluded by calling on stronger legislative and executive action. This was how the Church hierarchy made its position clear on using the law as crime deterrence, a theme that echoed justifications for the death penalty.

Lawmakers should re-examine our present laws and see if they actually embolden rather than deter criminals; stiffer laws with stiffer penalties should be enacted[...] We urge government authorities and courts of justice to faithfully and zealously perform their task of promoting law and order and eradicating this scourge of drugs.

The seriousness of drug use took on a more serious tone in separate statements a year later. In a statement released on January 31, drug abuse was listed as a predisposing factor for incest and rape. And in “Pastoral Exhortation on the 1998 Elections,” “drug menace” was among the social problems that caused the deterioration of peace and order in the country. Taken together, these statements were written to uphold human dignity. Drug use was a threat. The caveat, however, was that to respond to the threat, the Church hierarchy adopted a criminal view of drug use, which could only be addressed in terms of crime deterrence.

3.3 Social moral decay (2015–2016)

In the course of our analysis, we observed that drug use once again disappeared from Church statements during the presidencies of Joseph Estrada (1998–2001), Gloria Arroyo (2001–2010), and Benigno Aquino III (2010–2016). Only four brief references to drugs during Arroyo’s administration appeared in pastoral statements, and none when Estrada was the president. This is an interesting finding, given that both administrations embarked on their respective antidrug campaigns. Meanwhile, during the time of Aquino, only one statement, written in 2014, specifically mentioned drug use. It repeated what was said in the 1990s that “the use of drugs inflicts very grave damage on human health and life. Their use, except on strictly therapeutic grounds, is a grave offense.” How does one explain this considerable silence of the Church on drug use? We propose that the answer lies once again in the policies that defined these administrations. The death penalty took center stage during the time of Estrada, only to be prohibited by Arroyo later on. Talks about the Reproductive Health Bill began in the late 1990s but became full-blown in the time of Aquino when it was passed into law despite the Church’s vigorous opposition.⁴⁶

The relative silence on drug-related issues would once again be interrupted with a statement devoted to “addiction, freedom, and disciplines” released on July 13, 2015. That it came out as Aquino’s term drew to a close and the campaign for a new president commenced is very telling. Although Duterte had not formalized his candidacy at this time, talks about his potential run did abound.⁴⁷ The Catholic Church reiterated its concern over the proliferation of illegal drugs:

⁴⁶ Bautista, “Church and state”; Raffin and Cornelio, “Catholic church and education.”

⁴⁷ Rufo, “The 3 Cs.”

Certainly, one of the most pernicious forms of “colonization” has to do with the traffic in drugs and their use. Not too long ago, media was abuzz with reports of a new party fix: “liquid meth”, it is apparently called, patronized, peddled and consumed by the wealthy, both the adults and the young. But the poor, too, fall prey to this habit, through shabu, known as the “poor man’s cocaine.” It is less expensive than cocaine but still it is something the poor certainly could not afford. Shabu is also daringly ubiquitous, oftentimes peddled openly in parks, bars, and street corners.

Echoing their statements in the past, the bishops called on stronger measures from the government. The statement called for “Proactive Socio-Civic Pastoral Guidance” for migrants and their families, but as regards drugs, the bishops’ call was largely punitive, albeit clearly not to the extent of calling for the killing of addicts:

While the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines reiterates that the Church is against the death penalty, it calls for resoluteness from the police and law-enforcement agencies to prevent the trafficking of drugs; to apprehend those involved in the trafficking of drugs; to dismantle the syndicates and cartels involved in the drug trade, and to make sure that the drugs they seize are not recycled and brought back to the underground market. We call for the relentless prosecution of those responsible for trafficking in drugs and for those who traffic persons to be their drug mules.

A month later, the bishops released the “Pastoral Guidance on the Compassionate Use of Cannabis.” They reiterated the Church’s basic teaching on drugs: “The use of drugs inflicts very grave damage on human health and life.” The statement went on to argue that their use, “except on strictly therapeutic grounds, was a grave offense. Clandestine production of and trafficking in drugs were scandalous practices. They constituted direct cooperation with evil, since they encouraged people to practices gravely contrary to moral law.”

Some of these themes at this point are already familiar. Church leaders have articulated in the previous decades the concern for the youth, the culpability of drug traffickers, and the need to have stronger laws to deter crime. But perhaps what is noticeably different here is the social concern for those affected by drug abuse. The poor and the young were considered vulnerable to the proliferation of illegal drugs. A final reference to drugs on February 10, 2016 included it among the vices that can “damage the family”.

4 Morality politics and the Catholic Church

We argue that a consistent theme runs through the official documents discussed above. While the themes may have changed over the years, the concern has been consistently about a general moral decline that affects the youth, the poor, and the family. In effect, drug abuse places the future of the nation at stake. But it also needs to be emphasized that it was only during certain moments did this concern manifest in the CBCP’s public pronouncements. We have identified three such moments: the *period before Martial Law* (1971–1972) and the campaign periods that led to the election of two populist leaders: *Joseph Estrada* (1997–98) and *Rodrigo Duterte* (2015–16). How do we make sense of the upsurge in those particular periods?

One clue lies in the fact that those moments were associated with heightened moral panics around drugs.⁴⁸ Determining the extent of moral panic among people is difficult but media coverage is indicative. This is because media coverage allows for the circulation of intensified emotional responses on moral issues. In the 1970s, newspapers evoked the dangers of drugs, which found personification in the Chinese drug lord Lim Seng. His execution was a televised public spectacle.⁴⁹ Historian Ambeth Ocampo notes how newspaper writers at the time reported the execution in these terms:

⁴⁸ Tan, “The construction of drug abuse.”

⁴⁹ Lasco, “Drug wars as populist tropes.”

Death by musketry! This was the price exacted by society at 6 a.m. yesterday from drug manufacturer-merchant Lim Seng, alias Gan Suo So, at the KDR Range in Fort Bonifacio, Rizal. It could have been a costly price, but is the “living death” of more than 350,000 dope addicts not by itself a costly debt to society?⁵⁰

Furthermore, in the weeks leading up to the release of the 1997 pastoral letter, drugs figured in news articles as well, suggesting the existence of another round of moral panic around drug use. On July 7, 1997, for instance, *Manila Standard* cited a congressman as saying that “widespread drug abuse among employees[...] increases the likelihood of random workplace violence.” In the same issue, a policeman was tagged as a “drug lord protector.” The next day, it was reported that Muslim rebels took drugs before battle and that the Boy Scouts were joining the “antidrug drive.” More recently, the concern over illegal drugs came as the eventual winner Rodrigo Duterte highlighted in his campaign the issue of drug addiction. He claimed that “it is destroying the country.” Duterte’s campaign rhetoric turned the proliferation of illegal drugs into a national concern.⁵¹

Arguably, a generalized moral panic around drugs has been around since the 1970s. As the anthropologist Michael Tan pointed out, a “daily morality play” cast “addicts” as deviants through film, radio, newspaper, and other media.⁵² In 1972, the film *Kill the Pushers* was released, depicting the dangers of drug use and valorizing those who go after pushers. The film, which won the FAMAS Award for Best Picture in 1972, was the first of many to involve the negative consequences of drugs as a major part of the plot.⁵³ However, the moments we have identified here were also politically loaded as illegal drugs figured in the *realpolitik* of the time. In 1971, it was Ferdinand Marcos who sought to paint a picture of a country under attack. In 1997, Joseph Estrada tapped then Manila mayor and presidential aspirant Alfredo Lim to lead a controversial campaign that involved spray-painting the houses of suspected drug personalities. In 2015, it was Davao mayor and eventual president Rodrigo Duterte who would revive the drug discourse.

What validates our observation is that during the years in which the Catholic Church did not make any statement about drugs, other issues were at play for religious leaders.⁵⁴ The Church in effect has a reactionary preoccupation with matters of national concern. In the early 1990s, for instance, the major debate in the country was birth control, and this was also reflected in the pastoral letters. When the nascent Ramos administration attempted to popularize artificial means of birth control in 1993, the Church devoted an entire letter dated July 13, 1993, denouncing the “subtle attack on human life is the erosion of esteem for it under the guise of good.”⁵⁵ During the Benigno Aquino administration – another hiatus in the CBCP’s mention of drugs – the Church was preoccupied with opposing the passage of the Reproductive Health Law. Their stance was likewise reflected in their pastoral letters during this period.

We do not wish to make claims of causality or overstate the influence of bishops in government policy. What we propose instead is that the CBCP through its statements during these periods has contributed to the moral panic over drug use, given its institutional influence as a moral entrepreneur. Specifically, Church leaders placed a spotlight on drug use as a social and moral problem. For one, they underscored the need for stronger (and even relentless) measures to address the proliferation of illegal drugs. But at the same time, their statements did not only echo political and public concern over drug abuse. They provided the religious justification for the moral disgust toward illegal drugs. Just 2 months after the 1972 statement on drug abuse was released by the CBCP, the Dangerous Drugs Act of 1972 (RA 6425) was passed. It imposed the death penalty for drug-related offenses, presaging the declaration of Martial Law and the execution of Lim Seng. Over time, the Church’s statements reflected, if not reinforced, the long-standing repulsion Filipinos now have toward drug use and criminality as a whole. Indeed the association between

⁵⁰ Ocampo, “Lim Seng remembered.”

⁵¹ Holmes, “Dark side of electoralism.”

⁵² Tan, “The construction of drug abuse.”

⁵³ Some notable ones include *Fe, Esparanza, Caridad* (1974), *Bawal na Gamot* (1994), *Bawat na Gamot 2* (1995), *Batas ng Lansangan* (2002), and *Tulak* (2006). A scholarly review of the representations of drugs in Philippine cinema has yet to be undertaken.

⁵⁴ Bautista, “Church and state.”

⁵⁵ Cariño, Population policy in the Philippines. *Philippine journal of public administration*, 39(1), 88.

public opinion and drug policy is well-documented.⁵⁶ The satisfaction for Duterte's "relentless" war on drugs is indicative. A public poll by social weather stations (SWS) in 2019 reveals that 73% of Filipinos believe that the number of drug users has decreased since the war on drugs began in 2016.⁵⁷ This sense of security underpins the impression that the antidrug campaign has succeeded.

It is in this sense that the CBCP's statements must be read in the light of morality politics. We revisit two important points about morality politics and then relate them to the situation of the Catholic Church in the Philippines. The first, as we have pointed out above, is that morality politics is the struggle to define what is acceptable and not for society. Morality politics involves state policies and interventions that are underpinned by a moral worldview.⁵⁸ Thus, morality politics is ultimately the politics of sin or transgression.⁵⁹ The role of moral entrepreneurs, as we have discussed above, is crucial in defining on behalf of society its evils, usually in the form of undesirable behavior, beliefs, and even groups. This leads us to the second point. Morality politics is not just about actions sanctioned by law and the state. Ultimately, morality politics is a discursive act that creates divisions within a society between a moral group and its adversary. We find helpful Wataru Kusaka's work on party divisions in the Philippines in understanding how democratic players deploy moral discourses about righteousness to distinguish themselves from the corrupt.⁶⁰ The unintended consequence is that adversarial factions, usually class-based, become highly polarized that it becomes difficult to find common ground.⁶¹

What we have done in the previous section is to show that the Catholic Church has played a significant role as a moral entrepreneur that, while outside politics, remains influential in articulating religious and moral discourses about drug use and its effect on the youth, the poor, the family, and society as a whole. For a religious society like the Philippines, the Catholic Church is influential insofar as it draws on its teaching to shape much of the moral worldviews of many Filipinos. While the moral gravitas of the Catholic Church is increasingly open to question, especially in such areas as contraceptives and divorce, it remains to be a compelling voice on other matters such as gender equality, marriage, and in the case of this article, drug use.⁶²

What accounts for its enduring influence in society? We reflect on the following conditions to show that the CBCP's statements about drug use were shaped not only by the moments in which they were written. Ultimately, they reflect the CBCP's institutional self-understanding in relation to Philippine society.

The first is that the Catholic Church is an institution that defends conservative values surrounding sexual propriety, heteronormativity, and the family in the country. The Catholic Church may have been instrumental in reclaiming democracy especially in the post-Marcos period, but it does not uphold liberal values concerning these matters.⁶³ In fact, when Pope Francis himself visited the Philippines in 2015, he reminded his audience to resist "ideological colonization that tries to destroy the family," referring to contraception and same-sex marriage.⁶⁴ That Church bishops have over the years framed drug use as an affront to the family in keeping with this line of thinking. It also matters that Filipinos have by and large heteronormative attitudes when it comes to marriage and the family.⁶⁵

The second is the Church's claim over the Philippines as a Christian nation. This explains why even if the emphasis has changed over the decades, the Catholic Church's statements on drug use are ultimately about the sanctity of the Philippine nation. For example, they have argued repeatedly that the youth have to be protected because they are the future of the nation. Another example is the view the proliferation of

⁵⁶ Harrison, Backenheimer, and Inciardi, Cannabis use in the United States: Implications for policy.

⁵⁷ Panti, "73% of Pinoys."

⁵⁸ Mooney, "Politics of morality policy."

⁵⁹ Meier, "Politics of sin."

⁶⁰ Kusaka, "Moral politics."

⁶¹ Miceli, "Morality politics vs identity politics."

⁶² Cornelio and Dagle, "Weaponising."

⁶³ Bautista, "Church and state."

⁶⁴ Rocca, "Pope urges Filipino families."

⁶⁵ Cornelio and Dagle, "Weaponising."

drugs is a menace that needs to be arrested through the law. Taking all of these together, the concern about moral decay is about the family, the poor, and once again, the youth, whose morality are in effect being sacrificed. In view of this moral concern, to render drug use as an enemy of the soul of the nation is a compelling narrative that resonates with the fundamental basis for the popular support for the war on drugs itself: that moral citizens need to be redeemed from “immoral others.”⁶⁶ Moral power lies in religious discourse, a point that echoes observations made by scholars of religion and drug use in Latin America.⁶⁷

The view that the Philippines is a Christian nation is of course not new. In fact, this discourse is what makes the Catholic Church a hegemonic moral entrepreneur in the Philippines. Francisco has documented the many statements written by the CBCP to assert that Filipinos are the people of God.⁶⁸ This is the case even if religious behavior has been changing over time. Among the youth, notions of religiosity and spirituality are changing in ways that question the moral authority of the Catholic Church.⁶⁹ At the same time, even if there are now other religious groups that challenge the political dominance of the Catholic Church, statements made by the Catholic hierarchy are still widely read in parishes and local communities around the country.⁷⁰

5 Conclusion: toward compassion and redemption

This article has been concerned with the historical writings of the Catholic Church on illegal drugs in the Philippines. From the 1970s up until 2016, the statements reflected a deep concern for the welfare of the youth, the poor, and the family. Church bishops framed the proliferation of illegal drugs not only as a result of the influence of Western culture. They also related it to corruption and moral decay, both of which attack human dignity and endanger the future of the nation. As we have discussed above, much of the discourse reflects the recurrent moral panic about illegal drugs.

We end this article by providing tentative reflections on some of the very recent writings by the CBCP. We find that a shift is taking place. These writings are still emerging, given that the antidrug campaign has not yet ended. At the same time, there are no indications that the public wants it ended. After initial silence on the subject (for which they were criticized), the bishops issued a statement on September 14, 2016. By this time – over 100 days since Duterte took office and announced a relentless drug war – thousands of killings have been reported in the media. The statement begins with an invocation of Jeremiah 31:13: “In Ramah is heard the sound of sobbing, bitter weeping! Rachel mourns for her children, she refuses to be consoled for her children – they are no more!”

The above statement downplays its specific concern over drugs by referring to violence in general terms, implying the clergy’s reticence over confronting the popular government amid mounting calls for accountability:

We mourn with you at the deaths that we have seen in our communities. Violent senseless deaths in the hands of our brother Cain, unnecessary deaths by sickness and accidents, deaths from a terror bombing in Davao, deaths of babies caused by their own mothers, deaths because of police encounters, deaths from extra judicial killings – indeed every death is cause for mourning because in the death of every man or woman, in the untimely death of every child or infant, a part of us dies.

Significantly, however, the letter includes the language of compassion in relation to drug users. We note that this is the first time that the word “love” is mentioned in the same breath as “addiction” in any of CBCP’s statements about drugs:

⁶⁶ Kusaka, “Bandit grabbed the state,” 49.

⁶⁷ Lopes and Costa, “Drugs and religion.”

⁶⁸ Francisco, “People of God.” Cornelio, “Claiming the nation.”

⁶⁹ Cornelio, “Being Catholic.”

⁷⁰ Cornelio, “The Philippines.”

Our hearts reach out in love and compassion to our sons and daughters suffering from drug dependence and addiction. Drug addicts are children of God equal in dignity with the sober ones. Drug addicts are sick brethren in need of healing deserving of new life. They are patients begging for recovery. They may have behaved as scum and rubbish but the saving of love of Jesus Christ is first and foremost for them. No man or woman is ever so unworthy of God's love.

Succeeding pastoral letters are more explicit in expressing concern over the killings. In early 2017, the bishops rejected the war on drugs for its impact on left-behind families: "The situation of the families of those killed is also cause for concern. Their lives have only become worse." The same pastoral letter tackles the situation of justice in the communities. For the bishops, "many are killed not because of drugs" and "those who kill them are not brought to account."

The tone then shifts by August 2017, during which the deaths of several teenagers in Metro Manila have been widely reported in the media. CBCP turns its attention to the law enforcers themselves: "In the name of God, stop the killings! May the justice of God come upon those responsible for the killings!" Without referring to Duterte, the bishops use the very words of the president himself to challenge the prevailing worldview: "When we label members of our society because of the offenses they commit – or that we impute rightly or wrongly against them – as 'unsalvageable', 'irremediable', 'hopelessly perverse', or 'irreparably damaged', then it becomes all the easier for us to consent to their elimination if not to participate outright in their murder." Apart from calling for an end to the violence, the statements are asking for compassion and understanding. The bishops believe that drug users themselves deserve redemption. They are also concerned about the plight of affected families whose poverty is worsened by the murder of their breadwinners.

What is intriguing about this shift toward compassion and understanding is that it is no longer consistent with the moral decay evident in the CBCP's previous statements. In our view, it is a reflexive response to the violence of the drug war and its lack of evidence.⁷¹ It also calls into question the drug campaign's victimization of the poor. There is, of course, a difficult irony here. That the CBCP now calls for compassion no longer carries political gravitas. One reason is that to allay the moral panic that the Catholic Church itself reinforced up until 2016 is not going to be an easy task. The other reason is that the state itself has now transformed the moral panic into a moral warfare against what Duterte himself describes as the enemies of the state. Thus, the security of the nation, for many people, now demands that violence is necessary. Compassion, in effect, is too weak a response. This is the result of the politics of anxiety that sociologist Nicole Curato has documented in her own writings about Duterte's rhetoric.⁷² At the same time, a different morality is now at play even for other influential religious leaders themselves. Other important studies have repeatedly justified the war on drugs as a righteous intervention sanctified by God for the renewal of the Philippine society.⁷³

In light of the above shifts in their discourse, where do the Catholic bishops fit in contemporary drug policy debates? In terms of their perceptions of drug use, they seem to align with the view shared by most political actors that drugs are evil, disagreeing only with the government on how to deal with its proliferation and arguing for a more compassionate response. By contrast, harm reduction advocates in the country are pushing for a view of drugs as neutral and context-dependent substances. They believe that much of drug use is nonproblematic.⁷⁴

One indelible change, however, is the theme of redemption. While the bishops used to invoke the language of hopelessness – "mental and physical wrecks will be hopelessly doomed to ignominy unredeemable" – they now object to the president's view of people who use drugs as "beyond redemption." Articulating what should be obvious for the Catholic Church is significant, especially in the light of the principles of human dignity and the common good.⁷⁵ Such a shift suggests, at the very least, that the bishops' views on the matter are not dogmatic and constantly evolving. The shift is

⁷¹ Meier, "Drugs, sex, rock, and roll."

⁷² Curato, "Politics of anxiety."

⁷³ Cornelio and Medina, "Christianity and Duterte"; Cornelio and Marañon, "Righteous intervention."

⁷⁴ Feria, personal communication.

⁷⁵ Riordan, "Philippine common goods."

promising insofar as it creates a different pathway for the public to discuss the inadequacies of the war on drugs. Whether or not these statements are effective in bringing back human dignity into policy making remains to be seen.

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