ILLUSIONS OF INFLUENCE: CLERICAL PARTISAN ENGAGEMENT DURING THE 2022 ELECTION

Eric Marcelo O. Genilo, SJ

This paper will discuss the public partisan political activity of some priests and bishops during the 2022 Philippine presidential elections. This author will argue that this activity was contrary to the proper role of clergy in politics and undermined the Church's moral credibility and pastoral mission.

Definitions, Distinctions, and Parameters

This paper focuses on diocesan and religious clergy because of their role as ordained ministers of the Church. The points of this paper also apply to religious sisters and brothers whose public partisan political activity affects their apostolic work and communities.

This paper uses the term "public partisan political activity" to refer to public action or speech intended to influence voters to support or reject a candidate or party in an election. Applied to clergy, this can include public statements of endorsement or denunciation of a candidate, intentionally wearing or publicly exhibiting the party colors, symbols, images, or slogans of a candidate while identifying one's self as a cleric, hosting political activities of a candidate in church facilities or properties while excluding other candidates, using homilies and liturgical rites to support or denounce a candidate, and other actions that associate clerical identity with an endorsement or rejection of a candidate.

The term "public partisan political activity" is not applied to voting or having a private political opinion. The term also

does not refer to activities supporting honest, peaceful, and clean elections nor to efforts to eliminate all forms of corruption, injustice, misinformation, or violence in society. These are not partisan activities but are necessary contributions to the common good that every citizen, regardless of political affiliation, should promote.

A discussion of the qualifications of specific candidates for public office is not within the scope of this paper. The paper will only focus on the Church's teaching on political participation, the factors that contributed to the partisan political activity of some clergy during the 2022 presidential elections, and the moral and pastoral implications of such activity.

The Church and Political Participation

The Church's social teaching calls for the promotion of integral human development and the defense of human rights to ensure a just and humane society. The Magisterium considers politics an area of public life where Catholics should take an active role as responsible citizens. The *Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith* emphasizes the importance of political participation of every citizen to the proper functioning of a democratic state.

> It is commendable that in today's democratic societies, in a climate of true freedom, everyone is made a participant in directing the body politic. Such societies call for new and fuller forms of participation in public life by Christian and non-Christian citizens alike. Indeed, all can contribute, by voting in elections for lawmakers and government officials, and in other ways as well, to the development of political solutions and legislative choices which, in their opinion, will benefit the common good. The life of a democracy could not be productive without the active, responsible and generous involvement of everyone, 'albeit in a

> diversity and complementarity of forms, levels, tasks, and responsibilities.'[1]

While the Magisterium recognizes that the Church's mission in the world is primarily religious and that the Church and the State are independent of each other, this does not mean that the Church cannot engage the State on matters of religious, moral, and social importance.[2] While the Church recognizes that it does not have specific competence to speak about political structures and programs, it shares with the State the task of promoting justice for the good of every person under their care.

> Building a just social and civil order, wherein each person receives what is his or her due, is an essential task which every generation must take up anew. As a political task, this cannot be the Church's immediate responsibility. Yet, since it is also a most important human responsibility, the Church is duty-bound to offer, through the purification of reason and through ethical formation, her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically (Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, #28).

Church documents distinguish between the roles of the clergy and the laity in politics.

> We have seen that the formation of just structures is not directly the duty of the Church but belongs to the world of politics, the sphere of the autonomous use of reason. The Church has an indirect duty here, in that

[1]Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions regarding their Participation of Catholics in Political Life,* 24 November 2002, accessed 6 July 2022, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_ cfaith_doc_20021124_politica_en.html#_ftn4.

[2]Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2004), #424.

> she is called to contribute to the purification of reason and to the reawakening of those moral forces without which just structures are neither established nor prove effective in the long run. The direct duty to work for a just ordering of society, on the other hand, is proper to the lay faithful (Deus Caritas Est #29).

> ...the clergy can teach moral doctrines covering politics but cannot actively involve themselves in partisan politics. In practice, religious men and women are also included in this prohibition.[3]

> That pastors have competence in the moral principles governing politics and that laity have competence in active and direct partisan politics is a good rule of thumb to follow (PCP II, #342).

The Church has a duty to form the consciences of Catholics to guide them toward just and prudent political choices. This duty can involve educating the faithful on the necessary qualifications of a candidate for elective office and the correct way of making a discernment when faced with political choices. It is part of the formative duty of the Church to speak out against any political program or law that it considers gravely harmful to the common good. For example, John Paul II expressed his explicit opposition to laws threatening human life and called for Catholics to act according to their conscience and not vote for such laws.[4]

> In the case of an intrinsically unjust law, such as a law permitting abortion or euthanasia, it is therefore never licit to obey it, or to 'take part in a propaganda campaign in favour of such a law, or vote for it.'

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[3]Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), *Catechism on Church and Politics,* February 1988, accessed 27 June 2022, https://cbcponline.net/catechism-on-the-church-and-politics/.

[4]John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* #73 quoting CDF, Declaration on Procured Abortion #22.

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It is crucial, however, that any Church-supported campaign against specific laws and programs must pursue the common good of all and not focus on promoting Catholic interests. In a predominantly Catholic country such as the Philippines, some Church leaders tend to presume that, since most Filipinos identify as Catholics, national laws should embody Church teachings. In his essay, "People of God, People of the Nation: Official Catholic Discourse on Nation and Nationalism," Jose Mario Francisco analyzed the pastoral statements of the CBCP on nationhood and drew out an underlying "imaginary of a Catholic nation" in their discourse. The bishops' statements identified being Filipino with Catholicism and linked patriotism with support for the Church.[5] This imaginary of the Philippines as a Catholic nation emboldens the CBCP to make political interventions when it perceives that proposed national laws will violate Church teachings. Many non-Catholics and dissenting Catholics do not share the bishops' presumption that legislation should always conform to Catholic teaching. This is evidenced by the general public's support for passing the 2012 Reproductive Health Law despite the Church's opposition to the law.

The Compendium of the Social Teaching of the Church rejects any imposition of norms by a majority religion that is discriminatory to the rights of minority religions.

> Because of its historical and cultural ties to a nation, a religious community might be given special recognition on the part of the State. Such recognition must in no way create discrimination within the civil or social order for other religious groups.

[5]Jose Mario C. Francisco, "People of God, People of the Nation: Official Catholic Discourse on Nation and Nationalism," *Philippine Studies* 62, 3-4 (2014): 341-375.

> Those responsible for government are required to interpret the common good of their country not only according to the guidelines of the majority but also according to the effective good of all the members of the community, including the minority (Compendium#169).

The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines warned pastors against violating the religious freedom of non-Catholics and even dissenting Catholics:

> It needs emphasizing, that, although pastors have the liberty to participate in policy debate and formulation, that liberty must not be exercised to the detriment of the religious freedom of non-communicants, or even of dissenting communicants. This is a clear implication of Vatican II's *Dignitatis Humanae.* This is not just a matter of prudence; it is a matter of justice.[6]

> There may even be some Catholic believers who in all honesty do not see the truth the way the Church's magisterium discerns, interprets, and teaches it. In such a situation, the Church must clearly and firmly teach what it believes is the truth and require its members to form their consciences accordingly. Yet the Church must also, with all charity and justice, hold on to its doctrine on religious freedom -- that the human person is bound to follow his or her conscience faithfully, and must not be forced to act contrary to it.[7]

Church leaders have to respect the religious freedom of non-Catholics and the primacy of conscience of dissenting Catholics when they publicly oppose laws and programs that they consider to be contrary to the common good. Care must be taken to ensure that the interpretation of the common good is not simply drawn from a Catholic perspective but is achieved through communal discernment, dialogue between

[6]PCP II #358

[7]PCP II # 362-363

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different disciplines and sectors, and respectful negotiation among stakeholders within and outside the Church.

Clergy Partisan Activity in Elections and its Implications

The question arises whether the Church's duty to form consciences during elections includes explicit clerical endorsement or rejection of specific candidates or political parties. A distinction needs to be made between political rejection and political endorsement.

a) Denouncing a Candidate

Suppose a candidate or a political party publicly expresses an intention to introduce a law or political program considered unjust by the Church (e.g., restoring the death penalty or legalizing physician-assisted suicide). In this case, pastors must inform the consciences of Catholic voters regarding the harmful consequences of such a law or political program if these are implemented. The Church's teaching on the primacy of conscience, however, respects the right of Catholics to vote according to the best judgment of their conscience, weighing the advantages and disadvantages of each political option. There are situations where a particular candidate or party already has a historical record of gravely harmful policies or practices (e.g., racist policies or abusive use of power). Such situations can provide a basis for Church leaders to warn Catholics of possible negative consequences if a particular candidate or party is elected.

There is a historical pattern of campaigns by the clergy to denounce and reject candidates in Philippine elections. These rejections are not expressed through official public statements of the bishops' conference but in individual or group statements of some bishops and priests. Some candidates have

been denounced because of their religion (Fidel Ramos)[8], moral character (Joseph Estrada and Rodrigo Duterte), or family history (Ferdinand Marcos, Jr.). Some candidates have also been rejected because they disagreed with the Church on a critical issue.

Contraception is an example of an issue that can influence the Church to launch a negative campaign against a candidate. The clergy waged a partisan campaign against Juan Flavier during the 1995 senatorial elections. Flavier had been the Health Secretary, and he received much opposition and vilification from Church leaders because he promoted contraceptives in government health centers and distributed condoms to prevent the spread of HIV.[9] Similarly, some clergy denounced several legislators running for office in the 2013 midterm election who supported the passage of the Reproductive Health Law that allowed greater public access to contraceptives and sterilization.[10]

Does the Church have the authority to tell Catholic voters to reject a candidate? The CBCP's Catechism on Church and Politics allows bishops to oblige Catholics to vote for a political option under pain of sin, but this is only for rare and extraordinary cases.

> Is there any case when the Bishops can authoritatively order the lay faithful to vote for one particular and concrete option? Yes, there is, and the case would

[8]Robert L. Youngblood, "President Ramos, the Church, and Population Policy in the Philippines," *Asian Affairs* 25, 1 (1998): 3-4.

[9]Raymund Jose G. Quilop, "Religion and Politics in the Philippines," in *The Politics of Religion in South and Southeast Asia,* Ishtiaq Ahmed, ed. (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), 163.

[10]Eleanor R. Dionisio, "Catholic Partisanship in the 2013 Elections: 'Churchifying' Democracy or Democratizing the Church?," *Philippine Sociological Review* 62 (2014) 11-40.

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> certainly be extraordinary. This happens when a political option is clearly the only one demanded by the Gospel. An example is when a presidential candidate is clearly bent to destroy the Church and its mission of salvation and has all the resources to win while hiding his malevolent intentions behind political promises. In this case, the Church may authoritatively demand the faithful, even under pain of sin, to vote against this particular candidate. But such situations are understandably very rare.[11]

There is no objective basis to consider the presidential candidacies of Ramos, Estrada, Duterte, and Marcos a threat "to destroy the Church and its mission of salvation." Even when some bishops expressed opposition against these candidates, the episcopacy never obliged the faithful to vote against them under the pain of sin.

The problem with clerical attempts to publicly reject a candidate is that the issues which the clergy use as a basis to denounce a candidate are not necessarily the issues influencing Catholic voters decisively in elections. This is demonstrated by the fact that most of the denounced candidates mentioned above won despite Church opposition, some by a wide margin. The numerous times that Filipinos have rejected clerical appeals to vote against specific candidates reveal a disturbing disconnection between Church leaders and ordinary citizens regarding assessing political candidates.

Suppose Church leaders seek to prevent the election of a candidate who intends to introduce an unjust law. In that case, clergy can speak on the grave harm to society that the candidate's proposed laws or political programs can cause while acknowledging that other pressing social issues are also crucial to voters. This approach allows voters to decide

[11]CBCP, *Catechism on Church and Politics*, Part III, 6.

on the merits of the Church's position on an issue while also considering other national concerns (e.g., poverty, human rights violations, militarization, unemployment, food insecurity, environmental degradation, etc.). The clergy should not demonize candidates with offensive words. This is uncharitable, unjust, and inappropriate for pastors who are supposed to be signs of unity in the community and are expected to exercise civility in public discourse. Negative political campaigning by the clergy is disedifying to the faithful. It is also counterproductive because it increases sympathy and support for the denounced candidate, who will be perceived as an underdog bullied by the church authorities.

b) Endorsing a Candidate

The endorsement of political candidates by the clergy happens less often than political denunciations but is more problematic. One can understand why the Church could object to a candidate because of a perceived danger to the common good that the candidate represents. It is, however, difficult to justify clergy endorsement of a particular candidate if other qualified candidates are also running for the same office. A priest or bishop's endorsement of a candidate explicitly communicates to the public that this candidate has the qualities and political programs that the other candidates lack. If enough clergy unite their endorsements for a candidate, it can give the impression that the Church is calling for a Catholic vote in favor of the candidate.

As a body, the CBCP has denied the existence of a Catholic vote. The Church wants to differentiate itself from other religious groups whose leaders endorse candidates to their followers.

> The Bishops in the CBCP, while respecting what the leaders of El Shaddai and other groups have been

> doing for years, still maintain the freedom of Catholic members to choose their candidates. We expect them to discern, discuss and personally decide whom to vote for. To dictate to them who to vote is as bad as buying their votes. In the end, we cannot be genuinely sure whether the candidates who have been dictated on the voters will really serve them. All the more if the voters are taken with a 'buy and sell attitude.' Proof of this is the past experience of elections. The CBCP does not want the candidates to be indebted to the bishops; instead we want the candidates to make a genuine covenant with the electorate: that if elected they will serve the people and not themselves.[12]

> Are there so-called "Catholic candidates," or is there a "Catholic vote"? The Gospel does not prescribe only one way of being political or only one way of political governing (such as monarchical, presidential, parliamentary, etc.), much less only one political party or even one slate of candidates. No one political option can fully carry out the Gospel mandate of renewing the political order or of serving the common good. No one political party or platform or set of candidates can exclusively claim the name Catholic. Hence to Catholics, there are many political options that the Gospel does not prohibit. Therefore, there is generally no such thing as a "Catholic vote" or "the Bishops' candidates". This is simply a myth. The Bishops do not endorse any particular candidate or party but leave to the laity to vote according to their enlightened and formed consciences in accordance with the Gospel.[13]

While the Church allows lay Catholics to be members of political parties, the Magisterium also cautions the faithful from thinking that a political party can fully embody the Church's social vision and teachings.

[12]Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, *Freedom to Choose Candidates,* 13 March 2007, *CBCP Monitor* Vol II #6 (18 March – 1 April 2007).

[13]CBCP, *Catechism on Church and Politics.*

> To claim that one party or political coalition responds completely to the demands of faith or of Christian life would give rise to dangerous errors. Christians cannot find one party that fully corresponds to the ethical demands arising from faith and membership in the Church.[14]

Despite explicit statements of the CBCP denying the existence of a Catholic vote, there have been attempts by clergy and lay organizations to organize a Catholic vote for or against specific candidates. An official of the Episcopal Commission on Family and Life of the CBCP issued a threat to candidates during the 2010 elections, warning that "the Catholic Church knows how to mobilize its members not to vote for anti-life politicians."[15] In the 2013 midterm elections, Catholic lay groups such as Couples for Christ, the Knights of Columbus, and the Catholic Women's League started a Catholic Vote Movement to punish legislators who voted for the Reproductive Health Law.[16] The Council of the Laity (Laiko), directly under the CBCP Episcopal Commission on the Laity, called for a Catholic vote in the 2022 presidential elections.[17]

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[14]Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* #573.

[15]Carmen Crimmins, "Birth Control Battle Weighs on Philippine Economy," *Reuters,* 18 August 2008, accessed 6 June 2022, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-birthcontrol-idUSMAN9685220080818.

[16]UCANews, "Catholics Unite Against RH Bill Lawmakers," 14 December 2012, accessed 6 July 2022, https://www.ucanews.com/news/catholics-unite-against-rh-bill-lawmakers/66849.

[17]Sunstar Manila, "Laity Pushes for 'Catholic Vote' on 9 May," 29 April 2022, accessed 6 July 2022, https://www.sunstar.com.ph/article/1927656/manila/local-news/laity-pushes-for-catholic-vote-on-may-9.

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Pastors who objected to Church partisan activity in previous elections have supported clergy political endorsements in the 2022 elections. For example, Archbishop Socrates Villegas of Lingayen Dagupan spoke out against Church partisan endorsement in the 2013 midterm elections:

> In endorsing candidates, the Bride of Christ, the Church tarnishes her spiritual mission with the stain of the mundane. The endorsed candidate might win, but religion has been reduced to a political party; religion has been used for political gain, and our spiritual mission has been compromised. We will be lonesome widows after the elections for marrying partisan politics during the campaign.[18]

However, during the 2022 election campaign period, Archbishop Villegas defended the public support of clergy for the candidacy of Leni Robredo.[19]

When a cleric engages actively in campaigning for a candidate, there is a conflation between the cleric's identity as a representative of the Church and his partisan political advocacy. Some priests and bishops claim that they engage in partisan politics as individuals as if they can easily disassociate themselves from the Church they represent as ordained ministers. This argument presumes that priests and bishops can easily step out of their role as shepherds, ministers, and leaders and act in a politically partisan manner without any danger of confusion or scandal for the communities that they serve and represent. However, the Magisterium sees the cleric as intimately associated and identified with the Church. Even private actions of the clergy can have repercussions on their

[18]Dionisio, "Catholic Partisanship in the 2013 Elections," 26.

[19]UCANews, "Filipino Clergymen Defend Outspoken Support for Robredo," 20 April 2022, accessed 11 July 2022, https://www.ucanews.com/news/filipino-clergymen-defend-outspoken-support-for-robredo/96969.

priesthood, ministry, and the Church. One hard lesson that the Church has learned from the clerical sex abuse scandal is that an individual priest's inappropriate actions can seriously affect his priesthood, apostolate, fellow clergy, the institutional Church, and the communities he serves. A priest's or a bishop's identity as an ordained minister of God's people is not like a cloak one can take off while acting publicly in the political sphere. It is more like a person's skin that always expresses a unique ecclesial identity and carries with it the image and authority of the Church that ordained that person.

Pastoral and Moral Implications of Partisan Political Activity by the Clergy

The CBCP should have known better than to allow public political partisan activity by the clergy during the last elections. Past statements of the CBCP have already warned against clerical engagement in partisan politics and the harm it can cause to the unity of the Church.

> Why should priests, religious men, and women refrain from involvement in partisan politics? As we have seen, the prohibition is not because of any Philippine constitutional provision. But the Church prohibits clergy participation in partisan politics because they are considered symbols of unity in the Church community. For them to take an active part in partisan politics, with its wheeling and dealing, compromises, confrontational and adversarial positions, would be to weaken their teaching authority and destroy the unity they represent and protect.[20]

> It is precisely because of the possibility of plural options in politics that Church people who hold positions of leadership in the Church do not ordinarily engage in what is called "partisan politics". Church leaders represent the entire community which they head or

[20]CBCP, *Catechism on Church and Politics,* 1988, Part III, 2.

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> lead and for them to publicly and officially, as it were, push for one option over others when, these are equally compatible with the Gospel and hence moral, would be tantamount to claiming theirs is the only option in the Gospel to take and the people should follow their lead. This would be disastrous for the unity of the community.[21]

Concerned Filipino clergy have also objected to the overt partisan activity of some priests and bishops in the recent elections. Ranhilio Aquino argues that the teaching of Vatican II on partisan politics draws a line that should not be crossed.

> So, in these uncertain times, when on the one hand we have clerics asserting the right of the Church to repudiate evil — and by that, they mean campaign openly against the candidacy of one who they consider the embodiment of everything they dislike, other bishops have warned against the use of the pulpit for endorsing candidates and have cautioned against "crossing the line" separating the permissible from the impermissible. So, just where is the line? In the Church, the answer must come from the Chair. The answer must be built on rock!
>
> First, there is the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) that teaches: "Christ, to be sure, gave his Church no proper mission in the political, economic or social order. The purpose which He set before her is a religious one" (GS #42). "The Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system. She is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person" (GS #76).
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> Clearly then, when bishops and priests immerse themselves in partisanship that they form part of the

[21]CBCP, *Pastoral Exhortation on Philippine Politics,* 16 September 1998.

> divide between supporters of candidates or worse, bring it about; then, by the standards and precepts of the Second Vatican Council, the line has been crossed. That they must, however, speak against injustice or the perpetuation of iniquity is clear — but to identify a candidate as the harbinger of doom or the embodiment of corruption is quite another.[22]

In a clergy recollection, Joel Tabora warned of the dangers of partisan political activity and the clericalism it can foster.

> As clerics we stand for and identify ourselves with a message of salvation, our Gospel, that transcends the well-being any political party may offer for the temporal world. We do so officially and personally. We ought not endanger or compromise our message by confounding its truth and authority with the promise of any political program for the temporal world which promotes necessarily only a limited aspect of fraternity.
>
> The assessment of the current political situation as dire and the conviction that one's partisan political conviction is truth may distract clerics from their mission as proclaimers of the Gospel to all and as pastors for all through different political seasons and a diversity of political systems and choices. The graced identification of the cleric with the Gospel he proclaims liberates him from the compulsion in a dire situation to identify with a temporal political program.
>
> With the Gospel shedding light on our temporal situation, we make our own personal political choices. But we ought not allow our fallible partisan political choices to be confounded with the infallible Gospel whose proclamation is our mission. We must not insinuate that our personal partisan political judgement is anything more than just that, having no added argumentative weight because it is pronounced by ourselves as clerics.

[22]Ranhilio Aquino, "Chair and Rock," *Manila Times,* 23 February 2022, accessed 14 July 2022, https://www.manilatimes.net/2022/02/23/opinion/columns/chair-and-rock/1833928

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> We who have access to the confessional must also take special care that we do not pass moral judgement on the character, the benevolence, the motivation of all candidates because we are convinced of the goodness of one or of the perfidy of another.
>
> The clerics' partisan political position is not privileged in persuasiveness because it is the position of clerics. This is a type of clericalism we need to avoid in a synodal Church. Instead, we need to listen to the citizens who may not be voting as we do; we must allow our perceptions and convictions to be challenged by those who live and think differently from ourselves.[23]

Whether a political candidate endorsed by the clergy wins or loses in an election, there will always be negative repercussions to the Church's identity, moral authority, and mission. If an endorsed candidate loses, the Church's moral credibility and voice in politics is diminished. The election loss of the endorsed candidate can be interpreted as a repudiation of the church leadership's inappropriate partisan political interventions, and it is like a resounding slap on the face of the Church.[24]

If an endorsed candidate wins, the Church's pastoral and religious mission can also be compromised. The clergy will be encouraged to continue their partisan activity in future elections. This will foster political clericalism that gives priests and bishops the illusion of being political power players in the country. Candidates who win because of the Church's support

[23]Joel Tabora, "On Church Involvement in the 2022 Elections: Fraternity, Social Friendship, and Politics," *Fr. Joel E. Tabora SJ Blog*, 9 March 2022 (14 July 2022) https://taborasj.wordpress.com/2022/03/09/on-church-involvement-in-the-2022-elections-fraternity-social-friendship-and-politics/.

[24]Franco Jose C, Barona, "Poll Results a 'Slap in the Church's Face,'" *Manila Times* 11 June 2022, Accessed 29 June 2022, https://www.manilatimes.net/2022/06/11/news/national/poll-results-a-slap-in-churchs-face/184688.

may feel indebted to the church leaders and grant Catholics special favors not given to other groups. Bishops may start pressuring the government to pass laws that enshrine Catholic moral teachings to create a theocratic society.

Turning to the 2022 elections, one may argue that the Church has reason to object to a Marcos presidency. Still, partisan campaigning for Leni Robredo was not appropriate for clergy, even if it seemed an obvious choice from a strategic point of view. The partisan clerical campaign ultimately failed to move the majority of Filipino voters. It failed not just because of misinformation or the political tactics of the Marcos campaign. It also failed because it was offensive to many Filipinos who have consistently rejected clerical partisan interventions in past elections.

The argument that the Church prohibition on clergy participation in partisan politics can be justifiably suspended because of the urgency of preventing a Marcos presidency now appears rash in hindsight. This argument draws from the flawed principle that "the ends justify the means." This is a principle that the Church has constantly rejected. Using a wrong or harmful means to achieve a good end brings various unexpected consequences that can undermine the good one seeks. By allowing clergy to engage in politically partisan activity in favor of one candidate in the 2022 elections, the Church's leadership violated its directives for political participation. The CBCP's cooperation with and support for the partisan activity of its clergy contributed to the erosion of the bishops' moral authority on national issues and the increasing irrelevance of the Church as a formative and trustworthy guide in elections.

When priests are allowed to campaign for or against a candidate, the laity are forced to choose whether to support

or oppose the partisan advocacies of their pastoral leaders. Communities will be divided along partisan lines. Liturgical services that are supposed to unite the community are given a political color that will either attract or repel the faithful, depending on their political affiliation. Difficulties will arise in the pastoral relationship between the clergy and the people they serve. Clergy engaged in political campaigns may be uncomfortable ministering to Catholics who support candidates they oppose, and the laity may feel uneasy approaching a pastor who publicly rejects their political choice.

Contributory Factors to Clergy Participation in Partisan Politics

A narrow interpretation of Church prohibitions is sometimes used to justify inappropriate political activity. For example, Canon Law prohibits clergy from running for office. Some priests would interpret this as permission to engage in direct partisan campaigning for or against a candidate as long as they do not run for office. A bishop's instructions to his clergy not to use partisan language in homilies is interpreted by some priests as implied permission to campaign outside the pulpit.[25] Such interpretations overlook the value of non-partisanship that the prohibitions seek to emphasize. It is like saying that premarital sex can be acceptable since the Ten Commandments only prohibited adultery, ignoring the virtue of chastity that the commandment seeks to teach.

Another factor that draws clergy to partisan politics is imagery and language that frame an election as a battle between good and evil, with candidates belonging either to forces of darkness or forces of light. Church leaders either demonized or canonized candidates based on a single issue or

[25]UCANews, "Filipino Clergymen Defend Outspoken Support for Robredo."

qualification that acts as a litmus test. Some priests associate political choices as either voting for or against God: "God will judge us for the way we vote. . . How would Christ vote? Vote like Christ."[26] In reality, most elections are not reducible to a choice between a perfect candidate and an evil candidate. Using holy war or crusading language to mobilize votes for or against candidates is dangerous because it fosters division, prejudice, and hatred. A black-and-white approach to partisan politics by the Church is not only reductionist but is contrary to the example of Christ. He saw the possibility of conversion in every person.

Some clergy appealed to their sincere and prayerful conscience discernment to justify their partisan political actions being correct despite numerous prohibitions and warnings against such activities. A cleric's claim that his conscience led to his decision to cross the line between partisan and non-partisan political participation does not take away the possibility of error, nor does it diminish the objective harm that decision can cause. Even done with sincerity, a person's discernment can still lead to objectively wrong decisions if one's conscience is affected by peer pressure, fears, personal biases, intense emotions, inadequate consideration of consequences, and the bad examples of others, especially those in authority. The error may not be a sin, but it must be corrected, and any damage caused should be repaired.

Some clergy believed they were justified in their partisan political activity because of the encouragement and support of laypersons who agreed with their political advocacy. The problem with this justification is that we tend to talk with those who agree with us rather than engage and understand

[26]Tina Santos, "Bishop Soc Villegas Tells Faithful: Vote Like Christ," *Inquirer.Net,* 29 April 2019, accessed 11 July 2022.

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those who disagree with us. We sometimes prefer to stay within the echo chamber of our circle of allies rather than engage people with divergent views. We choose to look at the smaller picture that is more encouraging to our advocacy (e.g., the size of pro-Leni rallies) and ignore the bigger picture (e.g., the actual size of the Philippine voting population and the results of surveys by reputable polling institutions).

Some clergy erroneously thought that being non-partisan in the last election meant doing nothing and letting injustice win. This idea is incorrect. There are many things that a cleric can do to ensure justice, fairness, transparency, and truthfulness during an election without engaging in partisanship. Non-partisan voters' education programs and citizen organizations such as PPCRV always need volunteers. Clerics can speak against unjust laws, policies, and structures without making a political endorsement. Misinformation can be countered by the dissemination of accurate and truthful information. Being non-partisan in the election does not mean being indifferent to wrongdoing. It means protecting the integrity of the election process without telling voters who they should elect.

Some clergy who engaged in partisan political activity in the last election claimed that their actions represented a prophetic stand for truth, justice, and democracy, despite numerous statements from both the Magisterium and the CBCP that such partisan activity was not the way of the Church. PCP II states that "the public defense of gospel values, especially when carried into the arena of public policy formulation, whether through the advocacy of lay leaders or the moral suasion by pastors, is not without limit (PCP II #358)." Being prophetic does not take away the responsibility to act with prudence. There are limits to the means one

can use to promote or achieve justice. The fight for justice must be prudent enough to choose only those means that will not undermine the possibility of reconciliation in the future. Pastors who use harsh partisan means to influence the outcome of an election jeopardize their role as ministers of unity and communion in the Body of Christ, and they contribute to deeper divisions in the civic community that will be harder to heal, regardless of who wins the election.

A structural limitation in the CBCP prevents a consistent approach to political participation by the clergy. While bishops can suspend priests who seek to run for political office and order the clergy of their diocese to avoid explicit partisan political activity, the CBCP does not have a mechanism to prevent a bishop from engaging in partisan politics. The bishops' conference can come out with statements consistent with the catholic social teaching on political participation. However, it is up to every bishop to interpret and implement these statements. Bishops can ignore CBCP guidelines and act independently in their diocesan jurisdictions. The most that the CBCP can do is to declare that the non-compliant bishop acts as an individual and does not represent the bishops' conference. For example, during the 2013 midterm election, after the passage of the Reproductive Health Law, some bishops sought to endorse candidates who opposed the law and punish candidates who supported the law. Archbishop Ramon Arguelles of the Archdiocese of Lipa campaigned for the candidates of the *Ang Kapatiran* Party. The bishop claimed that "they are the only ones who are committed to promote what is good, true and Godly."[27] The Diocese of Bacolod hung posters outside its cathedral with a list of endorsed candidates as Team *Buhay* (Team Life) and a list of candidates to be rejected as Team

[27]Aloysius Lopez Cartagenas, *Becoming a Leaven of Society* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2014), 56.

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Patay (Team Death). The CBCP did not stop these bishops nor publicly disavowed their overtly partisan campaigns. The bishops' conference tolerated these campaigns because these activities aligned with the CBCP's pro-life agenda and the bishops' opposition to the Reproductive Health Law. If this is the case, the bishops acted not according to the principles of Catholic social teachings but according to strategic goals to promote their political advocacies.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Filipinos disappointed by the Marcos victory have largely blamed disinformation for the election outcome. Blame is also placed on undiscerning or misinformed voters. The Church has called for intensive voter education and campaigns against historical distortions. However, some lay people find this response arrogant, insulting, and condescending since it seems to imply that Filipino voters are too ignorant, too gullible, or too corrupt to make correct conscience decisions, and they need "more enlightened" Church people to tell them how to vote. This condescending attitude further distances the Church from ordinary Filipinos and erodes any remaining goodwill and trust they have in the Church. The focus on "re-educating" voters ignores the need for a critical assessment of the partisan political activity of the clergy and its damaging effect on the Church's moral leadership.

Since the CBCP's defeat in the battle over the Reproductive Health Bill, politicians have learned to ignore negative clerical campaigns against their candidacy. Using populist appeals and relying on the dissatisfaction of Filipinos against clerical interference in politics, politicians can now win elections even with opposition from church leaders. The hierarchy has effectively lost its prophetic voice in elections because of its misuse of political influence.

As long there are clergy who still believe in the illusion of their political influence, they will keep making the same mistakes in future elections. A vocal and engaged laity concerned about the integrity of the whole Church is needed to initiate and pursue the necessary change in the clergy's political attitudes and practices. Concerned laity must speak out in an organized and forceful way to the CBCP on why they object to clerical partisan political interventions. Just as priests and bishops have made statements endorsing and denouncing candidates, the laity should also come out with statements opposing improper clergy interventions in politics. The laity should not be relegated only to auxiliary roles as assistants and benefactors of the clergy. In the spirit of synodality, their diverse voices must be heard. Bishops and priests should listen not only to the laity who agree with them but also to those who disagree.

The CBCP should admit that it had been remissed in fulfilling its role as a formator of conscience during the last election and that its tolerance of clerical partisan political activity has damaged its credibility. The call of Vatican II for the Church to read the signs of the times should remind the clergy that the Spirit also speaks to God's people and that the clergy do not have a monopoly of wisdom. The clergy must recognize that the urge to engage in partisan politics is a temptation rather than an inspiration. Tabora compares the clergy's temptation to engage in partisan politics to the three temptations of Jesus in the desert.

> A cleric's engagement in partisan politics is similar to Jesus' temptation to reduce his mission to the temporal sphere and misuse his power to turn stones into bread. Facing this temptation, Jesus said, "One does not live by bread alone."

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> Or, a clerics' engagement in partisan politics is similar to Jesus' temptation to acquire all temporal power and glory, but just worship Satan. It is a temptation to disengage from the proclamation of the power and the glory of the Paschal Mystery as willed by God in order to engage in a political solution for a messy world. Jesus responded, "You shall worship the Lord you God, and him alone shall you serve."
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> Or, like the temptation of Jesus to throw himself down from the pinnacle of a temple, a clerics' engagement in partisan politics is reckless with the transcendent content of the Gospel and a presumption that the angels of God will save it from this recklessness. Jesus' response: "You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test".[28]

Just as Jesus ran away from the crowds who wanted to make him a king after feeding the five thousand, the clergy should also run away from the temptation to exercise partisan political influence in the life of our nation. The Church should remain vigilant against this temptation because, as Scripture reminds us, temptations can return at an opportune time.[29] We shall find out in future elections if the Church's leaders have genuinely learned from the lessons of history or if they will continue to cling to their illusions of political influence and further diminish their formative role in the country's political life.

[28]Tabora, "On Church Involvement in the 2022 Elections."

[29]Luke 4: 12, "And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time."