

“THE LIGHT OF CHRIST IN PHILIPPINE POLITICS: THE INTERVENTIONS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN STATE AFFAIRS (1972 – 2005)

Makati City, St. Pauls Store, ISBN: 978-971-004-232-6

At first glance, the title of the book suggests that the material might be another work sold for pious consumption; however, flipping upon the pages of De Nazareno's work¹ shows that this monograph is a product of rigorous academic research from an interpretivist analysis of official statements issued by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines. The discourses fleshed out from these statements served as the framework which guided the engagement of the organization to the Philippine political realm starting from its foundation in 1972 until the mid-period of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's presidency in 2005.

Works employing discursive analyses of CBCP's pronouncements and political stances are not scarce as several papers regarding the topic were already published. Despite the presence of this corpus, De Nazareno's book was prefigured by a similar monograph published in the Filipino vernacular language. Bestowed with a lengthy title in Filipino language, Demetrio's *Ang Mga Ideolohiyang Politikang ng Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines: Isang Pag-aaral sa mga Piling Pahayag mula sa Limang Panahon ng Kontemporaryong Ekle-siastiko-Politikang na Kasaysayan ng Pilipinas (The Political Ideology of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines: A Study on Selected Documents from Five Periods of the Ecclesiastical-Political History of the Philippines)* dissected the different political themes present among CBCP pastoral letters and located them in a binary classifications, namely, progressive-retrogressive and liberal-authoritarian wherein the former is categorized into five inclinations: radical, liberal, moderate, conservative and reactionary². In relation, De Nazareno's work also looked for lingering political themes; however, these themes were interpreted to shed light in order to understand the varying patterns of CBCP engagement in every administration from Marcos to Arroyo.

Published by a religious bookstore specializing in spiritual articles and theological research, the book *The Light of Christ in Philippine Politics* fell short to

- 1 Jose Maria De Nazareno, *The Light of Christ in Philippine Politics: The Interventions of the Catholic Church in State Affairs (1972-2005)*, ST. PAULS, Makati City, 2016.
- 2 Anthony A. Borja, Book Review: Ang mga Ideolohiyang Politikang ng Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines: Isang Pag-aaral sa mga Piling Pahayag mula sa Limang Panahon ng Kontemporaryong Ekle-siastiko-Politikang na Kasaysayan ng Pilipinas, *Philippine Political Science Journal Volume 37 Issue 1, 2016*, pp. 69-71.

possess the other features an academic book is supposed to contain particularly two elements: a review of literature, and a specific section how does this book demarcates itself from other previous works published about the topic of Catholicism's political engagement in the Philippines. While the book lacks these certain academic components, the richness of historical data sourced from a triangulation of official documents, media articles and published secondary sources provided a pool of information for future researchers if they intend to test new approaches formulated to dig deeper in our present understanding about the role of religion in modern-day politics. Such approaches include perspectives on lived religion and everyday politics³, relational dialogism⁴, epistemic communities⁵, and public theology⁶. For example, the CBCP's promulgation of the Marian Year in 1984 which resulted to an intensified promotion of Marian devout practices, which falls under the lived religion and everyday politics category, paved the way to condition the public opinion about the hand of the Virgin Mary in the providence of Philippine politics⁷. On the other hand, the symbolism of the martyr Lorenzo Ruiz⁸, Marian images during the protests⁹, and the One Hundred Days of Prayer and Penance¹⁰ are fit to be interpreted based on the lenses of relational dialogism since these actions are concrete manifestations of politicization of religious rituals. Finally, the CBCP's attempts to define what is appropriate political behavior, moral-political system and the supposed teleology of politics are actions belonging to the purview of epistemic communities and public theology approaches since they invoked their religious and theological expertise to provide normative guidelines in political behavior¹¹.

The first chapter presented the historical background of the CBCP along with the presentation of discourses with regard to the scope of the principle of separation of Church and State since 1958.¹² Meanwhile, the second to fourth chapters primarily narrated the love-hate relationship between the Martial Law regime of Ferdinand Marcos and the Roman Catholic bishops¹³. Chapter five examined the influential role of the CBCP on the constitutional commission as the

3 Sremac, S., & Ganzevoort, R., *Lived Religion and the Politics of (In)Tolerance*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2017.

4 Erin K. Wilson, Theorizing Religion as Politics in Postsecular International Relations, *Politics Religion and Ideology*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2014, pp. 347-365.

5 Nukhet Sandal, Religious actors as epistemic communities in conflict transformation: The cases of South Africa and Northern Ireland, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 37, 2011, pp. 929-949.

6 Nukhet Sandal, The Clash of Public Theologies?: Rethinking the Concept of Religion in Global Politics, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol. 3, No. 66, 2012, pp. 66-83.

7 De Nazareno, 2016, pp. 152-162.

8 Ibidem, pp. 114-120.

9 Ibidem, pp. 152-162.

10 Ibidem, pp. 198-205.

11 Ibidem, pp. 136-139; 244-316.

12 Ibidem, pp. 1-54.

13 Ibidem, pp. 55-190.

body discussed and debated the draft of the 1987 Constitution¹⁴. Chapters six and seven showed the paradigm shift of CBCP's political engagement with the with the administrations of Fidel Ramos, Joseph Estrada and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.¹⁵ An epilogue chapter was dedicated affirming the author's vision that the CBCP's political activism will be most likely to revolve on the prescription that the reinforcement of current political structures and institutions is the antidote to prevent another political crisis in the country¹⁶.

The book's exhortation of the discourses offered by CBCP in every administration followed a similar pattern. A contextual background was provided then followed by an analysis and interpretation of themes, lines, and excerpts from the CBCP pastoral letters. However, two questions deserve to be raised. First, in the second chapter, the author asserted that the Christian preference for a democratic form of government is an invention of the CBCP because the Vatican has no explicit policy or directive concerning the question of which political system is moral or not. The claim should have been supported by an interpretation of official documents from Rome such as Papal encyclicals especially the time frame of this specific chapter occurred during the reign of John Paul II, the pope known for his critical stance against totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. Second, the second and third chapters highlighted the CBCP's preference for bottom-up collective action from lay initiatives to achieve liberation from oppression, and the promotion of basic ecclesial communities (BECs), respectively. Despite the fact that the context revolved around the repeated tenet of the "preferential option for the poor" and lay empowerment phenomenon brought by the Second Vatican Council reforms, it is surprising to inquire why did the author failed to mention the concept of "liberation theology" especially the book pointed out two historical facts: first, the existence of Catholic religious leaders who collaborated with the the rural communist movement; and, the reality that both liberation theology and the BEC movement were ideas imported from Latin America.

On the other hand, the book's effort to be factual and impartial is observable since it revealed several marginalized realities in Philippine political history. First, the CBCP is not a monolithic religious institution during the reign of the Marcos regime. Historically, the organization supported and, to a certain extent, tolerated the initial years of the Martial Law implementation until its leadership was hijacked by a charismatic archbishop, Archbishop Jaime Cardinal Sin, which steered the organization's political engagement even after his retirement. Second, the book affirms the internal plurality within Catholic Church in the Philippines because of the overlapping spheres of authority of Catholic institutions operating in the country. One good example is the fact that diocesan bishops are co-equal among each other and they are only accountable to the

14 *Ibidem*, pp. 191-228.

15 *Ibidem*, pp. 229-356.

16 *Ibidem*, pp. 357-365.

Pope. Moreover, another instance is the disconnection between the institutional stance of the CBCP¹⁷ and the AMRSP (Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines)¹⁸ particularly during the Arroyo administration.

As lamented by Doce, the study on the role of religion in Philippine politics has been neglected since scholars have been satisfied to frame the research program based on interest group politics perspective¹⁹. However, this review optimistically hopes that De Nazareno's book will serve as an instrumental source of historical data for future attempts to reconstruct the field of religion and politics in the Philippines.

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17 Ibidem, p. 337.

18 Ibidem, p. 349.

19 Brian Doce, Revisiting the Philippine Reproductive Health Politics via the Lens of Public Theology: The Role of the Progressive Catholic and Protestant Sectors, *Politics and Religion Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2018, pp. 287.

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