

Ready, but there are different fonts

Duterte Contra Deus

Catholicism arrived in the Philippines in 1520 with Fernão de Magãlhaes/Magellan. Almost 500 years later, the Church that helped to overthrow Ferdinand Marcos now faces two major challenges: how to fight another dictator and maintain the glory of the past in a society that is “more evangelized than catechized”?

Patricia Fox, Regional Superior of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Sião Congregation, dedicated twenty-seven of her 72 years to the defense of the poor and oppressed in the Philippines. Accused of "involvement in illegal political activities", she was arrested on 16 April. On 3 November, she was expelled from the country, where she will not be able to return as a missionary. Upon arriving in Melbourne, after losing a tough legal battle, the Australian nun denounced President Rodrigo Duterte's “reign of tyranny”.

“They have no right to criticize me”, said Duterte, who had ordered the deportation of Patricia Fox. He was indignant that she should have joined in a protest against the murder of farmers, but above all because she participated in an investigation of the extrajudicial executions he had ordered when he was Mayor of Davao, on the Island of Mindanao, in the south.

Patricia Fox's ordeal, and that of other members of the Catholic Church (three priests were shot in April and June of 2018, and in December 2017), shows the risk that one of the most influential institutions in the Philippines has had to face since Duterte won the elections in May 2016 to become Head of State, retaining a popularity of almost 80% despite the thousands of deaths.

The President, who renounced Catholicism and approached a local sect, *Iglesia ni Cristo*, is proud of his disparaging and offensive language. “Your God is not my God, because your God is stupid”, he proclaimed.

A political revenge?

Duterte justifies the attacks on the clergy and the Church because of the sexual abuse he endured as a victim of the American priest Mark Falvey, when he attended the Ateneo de Davao High School. In 2007, the Jesuit Order in California, to which Falvey belonged, and where he died in 1975, paid 16 million dollars to nine people after it was proved that the Reverend had molested them when they were minors.

“As a lawyer and prosecutor, Duterte could be accused of abuse of office”, Edgardo Alfonso Vizcarra, a Filipino Comboni missionary, informed us by e-mail. “I do not think that the animosity towards the Church is only due to personal resentment. It is also a political issue. And he knows that the Catholic Church is crucial, as the most important, credible religious institution. He knows that many of the faithful will adhere to the Church if it calls for mass action against the way Rodrigo Duterte governs”.

“Vigilant co-operation is not enough to respond to the president's arrogant provocation”, the Filipino priest states, encouraging more criticism. “Prayer is not enough. The Church must do more to alert the faithful as to what is happening in the country”. It is because the Church “criticizes the

policy of the war on drugs” that Duterte harasses it, adds the Portuguese priest Antonio Carlos Ferreira, editor of the Comboni magazine *World Mission*, published in Manila. “Why not combat corruption and poverty? Why make the war on drugs a pretext for killing people outside the law; of people who have not been given the right to defend themselves or to state their version of the facts?”.

“Catholicism has taken on such local features in the Philippines that it has been described as a Catholic nation, but what distinguishes Filipino Catholicism is mainly its religiosity. This is one of the most religious societies in the world”.

During Marcos' dictatorship several ecclesiastical communities were attacked by military forces, and some of the religious leaders who were imprisoned even died. In 1986, the Philippine Church was led by the charismatic Cardinal Jaime Sin (1928-2005). He was a key-figure in the popular revolution that ended twenty-one years of a cruel, plutocratic regime.

Three decades later, how do the Catholic hierarchy and faithful deal with an autocrat whose policies are contrary to Christian doctrine?

A Secular and Catholic country

First, let us explain Filipino Catholicism. In 1520, Fernão de Magalhães, a Portuguese in the service of the Spanish Crown convinced the King of the Island of Cebu, Rajá Humabon, and his consort to convert to Christianity. The navigator in his turn offered them an image of the Child Jesus/*Menino*. Since 1565 that most ancient relic is permanently on view in the Minor Basilica of the Holy Child of Cebu, in the Philippines. The devotion to it is as deeply rooted as that accorded to the Black Nazarene and to the Crucifixion during Lent.

“On the whole, two out of a hundred Filipinos are Catholic and not just thanks to the efforts of the Spanish missionaries”, who continued their expedition despite Magellan /Magalhães having been killed by a rebel Chief on the Island of Mactan in 1521, according to Jayeel Cornelio, in an interview with *Além-Mar*. He is a sociologist of religions at the University Ateneo of Manila.

“Catholicism is considered to be a local religion, to the point that the Philippines has been defined a Catholic nation, but what mainly distinguishes Philippine Catholicism is its religiosity”, states the author of *Being Catholic in the Contemporary Philippines*. “This is one of the most religious societies in the world. Catholicism became so identified with the nation that it played a crucial role in the restoration of democracy in 1986. The Church was against the authoritarian regime of Marcos”.

“From an institutional point of view”, Jayeel Cornelio comments, “the Church is totally one from a sociological perspective, but clearly diverse, expressing a faith forged by socio-economic, geographical, cultural and political conditions. For example, in keeping with the secular character of the State, the Church, through members of the clergy and two laymen, entered the public sphere in defence of the poorest. Influenced by the Second Vatican Council of 1961, it began to take an active part in the protests of marginalized people, including women workers, despite the restrictions during martial law [imposed by Marcos from 1972 to 1981]. At times, the Church has succeeded as a privileged and predominantly male voice”.

In Manila, the academic affirms that in the Philippines the Church “faces a perennial democratic dilemma: it sees that it has considerable influence over the legislation and over voters, but notes that this influence is declining, as shown in 2012, by not approving the Law for Reproductive Health/Saúde Reproduction. The strong opposition of the Episcopal Conference [family planning and contraceptive methods] did not find an echo in the populace”.

Despite “tensions, divisions and vulnerabilities”, the churches continue to be full on Sundays, because”, as Cornelio says, “it is necessary to distinguish between the Catholic Church, as a public institution, and Catholicism, as a religion”.

“Catholic affiliation”, Cornelio stresses, “continues to be strong [despite a crisis of vocations and less practicing faithful in the cities, especially among young people”, according to Father António Carlos]. The rise of evangelical mega-churches and other religious groups does not appear to affect the number of Catholics, but the religious landscape is about to become competitive in the Philippines. Roman Catholicism will not advance if it depends on its glorious past. It should seek to be closer to the communities”.

Devotion and consciousness

The opinion of Edgardo Alfonso Vizcarra, MCCJ, is not much different from that of his fellow compatriot, Cornelio. In the Philippines, one of the two countries with a Christian majority in Asia (the other is East Timor), “Catholicism is a faith that mostly evangelized, but did not catechize sufficiently to form a full Catholic conscience”, he says. “Consequently, we cannot say that we have a comprehensive Catholic mentality and vote. We are deeply religious, but only in terms of devotion and piety”.

“Filipino Catholics are happy to sit on our church pews every Sunday. A majority try to do more. A way to implement religious renewal is to go out to meet people; create a forum where pastors and faithful can discuss issues that interest youth, families, and society. We are afraid to be open. The Church is sometimes accused of not being open to the faithful”.

“The Church is reluctant to give up the tendency to ‘sacramentalise’ everything”, Father Edgardo states. “It places too much emphasis on rites and rituals. The Church must respond to the needs of the poor people, not only their material poverty, to enable them to develop. The clergy must overcome its fear to go to the peripheries. But as shepherds, we have to be where the flock is and not in the sacristy”. Finally, as Pope Francis admonishes, we “are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel”, (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 20).

THIRTY YEARS OF COMBONI MISSION

Three decades have passed since the Comboni Missionaries arrived in the Philippines, in January 1988. It is one of the two countries with a Christian majority in Asia, (the other one is East Timor), and half the Catholics of the continent live here. We contacted a small group in Manila, who had responded to Pope John Paul II’s appeal for greater commitment to the evangelization of the region. The South-East Asian archipelago, with over 7,600 islands and a population of 110 thousand, served as a “preparatory platform for the mission to China; as a bridge to that enormous country”, Father António Carlos Simões stated. In 2015, he moved

from Lisbon to the Philippine capital as editor of the *World Mission* magazine linked to *Além-Mar*. “Here we work to promote vocations and train young people who aspire to embrace the Comboni missionary life”, he explained. “During the year, we organize solidarity events for the poorer families, providing food, clothing and didactic equipment”. The two Comboni communities in the Philippines have national missionaries, who work in Macau, while others train to go to Africa and South America.

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