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Debating the RH bill

On so fundamental a proposal as the Reproductive Health bill (HB 4244), there is bound to be wide and passionate disagreement. The bill touches on matters that lie within the scope of three basic institutions: the State, the Church, and the family. Although differing views on such matters may not always be reconcilable, they can be made – in the spirit of democracy -- to accommodate one another.

To get to that point, it is essential that the parties must give up the use of threats or coercion to bolster their respective position. The mere mention of ex-communication or criminal prosecution in the course of an ongoing debate is enough to fuel extreme reaction. Debaters and discussants must stick to the main issues, avoid name-calling, and not indulge in polemics. They must try hard to see issues from the standpoint of the other, instead of privileging their own way of seeing as “commonsensical” or “rational” or truly “moral.” Such words can be conversation-stoppers.

On this issue, I don't expect much from the encounter between the Church hierarchy and the leaders of the State. Each side will reiterate and promote its own definition of reality. More than that, both institutions will try to stretch their sphere of influence on society to the extent they can. The Church cannot be expected to view the world from the standpoint of secular leaders. That is not its role. In like manner, political leaders in a modern state cannot allow decision-making to be controlled by any religion without violating the autonomy of politics that is crucial to a democracy.

In transitional societies like ours, the vulnerability tends to hobble largely the political side. We see this in the way political legitimacy is routinely and brazenly sought from religious leaders – not only during elections

but especially during times of crisis. When citizens habitually ask bishops to sanctify the political choices they make, they make it hard for them to back off on all other matters of state. Perhaps at no other time was the vulnerability of government to religious interference as evident as during Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's presidency. She served as the clergy's principal conduit to Congress. She made sure that the RH bill would not move an inch during her term, even if her own allies were among the bill's fervent supporters. In turn, the Church rewarded her by softening public criticism of her governance.

In contrast, we have today a president who not only supports the bill but also risks antagonizing the Church by repeatedly expressing his stand in public. Instead of allowing the fate of the bill to be decided at closed-door meetings, this administration has encouraged free and open discussion of its merits and demerits.

One can immediately see the effect of this readiness to debate in the boldness of the growing number of legislators who support the bill. But, it is obvious as well in the stance taken by those who oppose it. Though their objections are fundamentally religious, they find themselves having to couch these in non-religious language. They frame their arguments in moral and constitutional terms, raise issues of practicability, or argue from economic and political rationality. They do not flash the religious card, knowing they are legislating for an entire nation and not for a particular religious community. That's how it is supposed to be in a democracy.

But, though it may not be obvious at first glance, rapid ferment is taking place within the Philippine Church itself. One cannot think of any other time when there was more open questioning by the faithful of the hierarchy's rigid position on reproductive health than today.

The key issue is whether the ban on contraception is dogmatically defined and thus irreformable. The famous Catholic theologian Karl Rahner does not think that the papal encyclical *Humanae vitae* can be considered "irreformable doctrine." Still, he believes that "the presumption

should be in favor of the Pope's declaration."

But so complex are the issues, Rahner goes on to say, that many may be unable to accept the pope's doctrine. A cogent summary of his highly nuanced position, written for a German publication in 1968, has been provided by Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J., who taught religion and society at Fordham. (http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=10722) It is useful to cite Rahner at this time because he shows the Church to be the living institution it should be, staunchly defending its place in a changing world while remaining sensitive to dissenting voices within it.

"Bishops, Rahner makes clear, should surely instruct the faithful about the meaning and weight of the pope's decision, and warn the faithful to take it seriously.... On the other hand, bishops should not act as though the encyclical were irreformable or as though everyone who dissented were guilty of contempt of authority or were separating himself from the church. They should refrain from imposing canonical penalties on persons who respectfully and discreetly propose another view.... If no one could voice his opposition to reformable doctrines, the development and correction of the church's official teaching would be seriously hampered."

Rahner's views stand in contrast to the intolerance with which some members of our clergy have treated those who differ with the official teaching on contraception. My sense is that, in the last analysis, the strength of the Church will be tested not by what happens to the RH bill but by the grace with which it is able to deal with the dissenting voices within it.

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