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## Letting the Texts on RH Speak for Themselves: (Dis)Continuity and (Counter)Point in CBCP Statements

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# Letting the Texts on RH Speak for Themselves (Dis)Continuity and (Counter)Point in CBCP Statements

In the fierce debate over any government legislation or program on reproductive health (RH), the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) represents the most vocal and consistent opposition from any institution in Philippine society. This article situates this opposition within the historical background of church involvement in social issues and offers a close reading of all its RH-related collective statements (1969–2014). Taking Catholic doctrine on marriage and family as given, it uncovers (a) shifting frames of reference in arguing the church's opposition, and (b) ambiguity in its analysis of the state of Filipino families. These characteristics undermine the bishops' avowed task to provide effective pastoral guidance to Filipino Catholics.

**KEYWORDS: FILIPINO CATHOLICISM, REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH, CBCP, RELIGION AND SOCIAL ISSUES**

The Reproductive Health (RH) Law (Republic Act 10354) has courted contestation before, during, and after the legal process that culminated in its signing into law by Pres. Benigno Simeon Aquino III on 28 December 2012. It has been contested heatedly not only in popular media but also in academic discourse from various disciplines. Throughout this civil process, academics have written countless articles, the most recent being David Buckley's (2014) article in this journal, at least two doctoral dissertations—Chow (2011) and Leviste (2011)—and two books—*The RH Wars* (David et al. 2014) and the anthology *A Conversation About Life* of pro- and anti-RH essays (Carvajal et al. 2014).

As a contribution to the ongoing academic discussion, this article examines official statements issued in the name of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) and focused on the RH Law and other related themes such as family, sexual issues, and population control. It covers "pastoral letters, statements, exhortations, appeals, special messages, and even norms" (Quitorio 1996, xvii), but excludes statements of individual bishops and CBCP commissions. Because no comprehensive critical edition of CBCP statements exists, quotations drawn from texts issued prior to 1999 come from Quitorio's 1996 anthology, *Pastoral Letters* (cited PL followed by a number), specific titles of which are given in the list of abbreviations; and those of later texts, from the official CBCP website (cited as CBCP followed by the year of issue).

What this article undertakes is a close reading of official CBCP discourse without extratextual considerations of authorship or context. Although discussing the possible drafters and actual circumstances of each statement would be enriching, using this approach focused on "the world of the text" serves to filter out the extraneous static of many RH discussions but without implying essentialist views of textual meaning. A textual archaeology of reading the lines of CBCP statements as well as between them seeks to discover the CBCP's perspective on church teaching on marriage and the family in the Philippine context. It does not interrogate church doctrine itself but examines how it is articulated in relation to the Filipino family in line with the bishops' pastoral responsibility: "it is our task first to alert consciences to the continuing happenings affecting our lives, and then to help in the critical examination of these happenings in the light of our Faith" ([PL 3] Quitorio 1996, 396).

## The CBCP amid Other Voices

In order to understand its significance, the official collective voice in the CBCP statements needs to be situated within the plurality of voices outside and within Filipino Catholicism. It represented the most vocal and consistent opposition from any institution to every government legislation and program on reproductive health matters. This opposition also brought the CBCP against various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) of women, poor communities, and other civil society constituencies, and even against majority opinion that favored reproductive health in general. A 2008 survey showed that 71 percent of Filipino Catholics supported the proposed RH legislation (Social Weather Station 2008); so did 69 percent in a 2011 survey (Montenegro 2010).

Some Catholic voices such as those of individual bishops and officially recognized groups supported and amplified the CBCP statements. At the same time, other groups identifying themselves as Catholic—notably some faculty members at the Jesuit Ateneo de Manila University (The Presidentiables Blog 2010) and the Christian Brothers' De La Salle University (Fernandez 2012)—favored such legislation; so did some newspaper columnists speaking as Catholics like Domini Torrevillas. Indicative of this division within the Catholic Church were newspaper columns of the constitutionalist and Jesuit priest Joaquin Bernas (2012), who raised specific questions regarding some bishops' statements on constitutional grounds.

The official Catholic voice in the public domain and the diverse voices within and outside the Catholic Church have been heard before throughout Philippine history. From the sixteenth-century entry of Spanish colonization and Catholicism, church leaders spoke and acted on issues affecting the body politic as well as the Catholic community (Francisco 2014). Catholic missionaries generally collaborated in the colonial enterprise under the *Patronato Real de las Indias*, except in particular issues that, they thought, threatened church interests. During the nineteenth century other voices from native Catholic leaders, both cleric and lay, emerged and as a result Catholics were on both sides of the nationalist movement and Philippine Revolution (1896–1898) (Francisco 2005). On the one hand were Spanish ecclesiastical and colonial authorities with their native allies; on the other were native leaders and participants from diverse ethnic or social backgrounds as well as differing economic or political interests, all united by anticolonial sentiments (Ileto 1979; Schumacher 1981).

During nearly fifty years under American colonial rule, new voices speaking in English were heard—those of the United States government, different Protestant churches, and even newly arrived Catholic religious orders and missionaries. The official voice of the still hispanized church often took a defensive, sometimes muted, tone (Schumacher 2009), and even came into conflict with other Catholic voices. As the most dramatic example of this conflict, the 1956 labor strike at the Dominican University of Santo Tomas pitted the official voice of the Catholic hierarchy against the employees' union supported by Jesuit priests and alumni (Fabros 1988, 66–81).

With Philippine independence after the Second World War, the official voice of the Catholic hierarchy became the Catholic Welfare Organization, the precursor of the CBCP prior to the Second Vatican Council. It spoke in defense of its extensive involvement in education and opposed nationalist views from Masons, Communists, and other non-Catholic groups (Francisco 2014, 347–55). With fundamental change in the church's self-understanding and relation to society that the Second Vatican Council brought about, the CBCP issued countless statements on social issues especially in relation to Pres. Ferdinand Marcos's authoritarian regime (1972–1986) and the 1986 "People Power Revolution" that installed Corazon Aquino as president.

But even during this period, fierce ideological divisions in Philippine society were reflected within the Catholic Church. Aside from politicians and others who supported the Marcos regime, certain bishops opposed the CBCP statements, refusing their dissemination in their dioceses. Robert Youngblood (1990, 194) has narrated the tale of two competing documents from different groups of bishops regarding the 1976 referendum.

With the 1983 assassination of Benigno Aquino Jr., the anti-Marcos voice in the CBCP gained the upper hand and succeeded in their historic statement of 13 February 1986 to rally people "to speak up," "to repair the wrong," and to do so in a "systematically organized" way ([PL 6] Quitariorio 1996, 623). From then onward, the official discourse of the Philippine bishops has become an even more dominant voice in Philippine society, with almost 100 statements issued on social issues alone.

Situated along this long-standing history of official church involvement in social issues and ensuing conflicts with other voices, including Catholic ones, the CBCP statements on reproductive health appear as the latest chapter in this history. Their dominant and collective voice has curtailed

any government action on reproductive health for decades until President Aquino signed the legislation at the end of 2012.

With this background, a close textual study of all its RH-related statements becomes all the more important to uncover what internal dynamics operated within them and how the official collective voice of the Catholic Church related to other voices in the public domain. In pursuit of this goal, the first section of this article begins with a general scan of the chronological distribution, intended audience, and classification according to thematic focus of all RH-related statements of the CBCP. Using the framing approach employed by David et al. (2014), the second section discusses how the core Catholic doctrine on marriage and family is situated within different frames of reference, thereby showing both continuity and discontinuity. The third section exposes the CBCP's ambiguous and incomplete assessment of the Filipino family. The fourth section proposes directions toward a more integrated discourse on church doctrine and the Filipino family.

## Scanning the Textual Surface

Cursory reading of these RH-related texts—often issued like others after the CBCP's biannual meetings in January and July—provides initial information and insight into their perspective. Since the CBCP's establishment in 1965 after the Second Vatican Council and Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical against contraception, *Humanae vitae*, the official CBCP website has listed thirty-two texts (excluding vernacular translations) that discuss RH itself or themes and comments about sexuality, family, and gender (table on pp. 228–29). Noteworthy is the absence of any RH-related document issued during the political turbulence of the 1980s.

Moreover, although much repetition occurs among and within the documents, their titles and main points cluster around certain themes (table on pp. 228–29). The first major cluster (A) centers on the Catholic doctrine on marriage, family, and sexuality, and is represented by many general statements of church teaching. The second major cluster (B) of three texts (30 January 1969, 8 December 1973, and 10 July 1990) plus a section of the 20 February 1971 Report concentrates on the relation between poverty, population control, and family planning. The third and largest cluster (C)—half of the total number of documents and all issued from 2000 onward—rejects particular government proposals, programs, and activities related to reproductive health.

**Thirty-two Statements of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) Related to Reproductive Health (RH), 1968–2014**

DATE	TITLE	CLUSTER*
12 Oct 1968	Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Hierarchy of the Philippines on the Encyclical Letter Humanae Vitae	A
4 July 1969	Statement of the Catholic Bishops on Public Policy regarding Population Growth Control	B
20 Feb 1971	Report of the Philippine Hierarchy to the People of God in the Philippines on their Deliberations at the Annual Bishops Conference	B
8 Dec 1973	Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Hierarchy of the Philippines on the Population Problem and Family Life	B
8 Dec 1973	Moral Norms for Catholic Hospitals and Catholics in Health Services	A
30 Jan 1976	Statement on the Doctrine of the Church on Christian Marriage	A
1 May 1976	Joint Pastoral Letter on Christian Marriage and Family Life	A
29 Jan 1977	The Bond of Love in Proclaiming the Good News, A Joint Pastoral Letter to Our People	C
29 Jan 1979	"Thou shalt not kill" (A Joint Pastoral Letter of the Philippine Hierarchy on the Life of the Unborn Child)	A
10 July 1990	Guiding Principles of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines on Population Control	B
7 Oct 1990	Love is Life, A Pastoral Letter on the Population Control Activities of the Philippine Government and Planned Parenthood Associations (Short Version for Pulpit Use)	C
23 Jan 1993	In the Compassion of Jesus, A Pastoral Letter on AIDS	A
13 July 1993	Save the Family and Live, A Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines on the Family	A
10 July 1994	Pastoral Statement on Cairo International Conference on Population and Development	C
9 July 1995	"I will make a suitable companion for him" (Gen. 2:18), Pastoral Statement on the Forthcoming Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing	C
12 July 1999	"Blessed are the Pure of Heart!" (Mt 5:28), Pastoral Letter on Pornography	A
26 Jan 2000	"That they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10), Pastoral Statement on the Defense of Life and Family	C

DATE	TITLE	CLUSTER*
2 Dec 2001	Saving and Strengthening the Filipino Family, A CBCP Pastoral Statement on the 20th Anniversary of Familiaris Consortio	A
2 Dec 2002	The Christian Family: Good News for the Third Millennium, A Pastoral Statement of the CBCP for the Fourth World Meeting of Families	A
31 May 2003	We must reject House Bill 4110, (A Pastoral Statement of the CBCP)	C
18 Feb 2005	"Hold on to your precious gift," A Pastoral Letter on Population Control Legislation and the "Ligtas Buntis" Program	C
18 Sept 2005	"Karangalan ng Bayan, Pamilya ang Pagmumulan," A Pastoral Letter on the National Celebration of Family Week on September 19–25, 2005	C
14 Nov 2008	Standing Up for the Gospel of Life, CBCP Pastoral Statement on Reproductive Health Bill	C
16 Sept 2009	Reiterating CBCP Position on Family	A
2 March 2010	On the Government's Revitalized Promotion of Condoms	C
11 July 2010	CBCP Press Statement at the Conclusion of the 101st Plenary Assembly	C
24 July 2010	Securing our Moral Heritage: Towards a Moral Society (A Pastoral Exhortation on Proposed Bills on Sex Education and Reproductive Health)	C
30 Jan 2011	Choosing Life, Rejecting the RH Bill (A Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines)	C
22 July 2011	Proclaim Life...in Season and out of Season	A
15 Dec 2012	Contraception is Corruption! A CBCP Pastoral Letter on the Latest Decision on the Reproductive Health Bill	C
28 Jan 2013	Proclaim the Message, in Season and out of Season (cf. 2 Tim 4:2) (A Pastoral Letter of the CBCP on Certain Social Issues of Today)	C
7 July 2014	"Truly children are a gift from the Lord; the fruit of the womb is a reward" (Ps 127:3), Pastoral Guidance on the Implementation of the Reproductive Health Law	C

\*Key to Cluster category based on Thematic Focus:

A = Catholic Doctrine and Pastoral Implications

B = Poverty and Population Control

C = Critique of RH-Related Government Activities, Programs, and Legislation

Source: CBCP 2015

Of further interest is the shift in the specific addressee of these CBCP texts. Although half of the texts omits such explicit reference, some earlier documents identify their addressee as Christians—“dear brothers and sisters in the Lord” or “beloved brothers and sisters in Christ.” The *Humanae vitae* statement adds “the very reverend clergy” in an effort to emphasize their important role in the reception of the encyclical. However, later documents seek to address not just Christians but non-Christians as well. The 9 July 1995 statement on the Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing opens with “dear sisters and brothers” ([PL 8] Quitorio 1996, 829), and two against the proposed Reproductive Health Bill dated 30 January 2011 and 22 July 2011 with “our Filipino brothers and sisters” (CBCP 2011a, 2011b), thereby widening its audience to the entire nation.

These general themes and intended audiences help in uncovering the world of the CBCP texts related to reproductive health. For instance, the increased number of documents after the year 2000 and the shift to the Filipino nation as addressee indicate the CBCP’s reaction to the growing advocacy within the Philippine government, particularly the bicameral legislature, as well as among civil society groups for corresponding changes in public policies and strategies.

### **(Dis)Continuity in Relation to Church Teaching**

Catholic doctrine on marriage, family, and sexuality undoubtedly constitutes the core of all CBCP documents under consideration, but this core is explained and developed in various ways. This characteristic of the CBCP texts mirrors the history of universal church teaching on contraception which, according to John Noonan (1986, 6), “is clear and apparently fixed forever” but also characterized by tension and reaction as “the reasons, related doctrine, and environment changed.” This continuous doctrinal core is the central focus of ten statements of varying scope of treatment. Two relate to important encyclicals—Paul VI’s *Humanae vitae* (1968) and John Paul II’s *Familiaris consortio* (1980); some offer summaries or aspects of doctrinal teaching, and others pastoral implications on specific issues like abortion or pornography.

It is no mere coincidence that the first relevant CBCP pastoral letter was issued soon after *Humanae vitae*. Although this text concentrates on the contentious worldwide reaction to the encyclical and the role of local clergy in guiding Catholics, it clearly states the church’s teaching against

artificial means of contraception. But more than articulating this teaching on contraception, the pastoral letter offers the Catholic view on the nature of marriage and family as the basis for this prohibition:

[The encyclical] stresses the beauty and dignity of conjugal love. It states very clearly that it has its origin in God, Who is Love, that it has been elevated to sacramental dignity, that the interpersonal communion of the spouses is a symbol of the union of Christ and the Church. . . .

Marriage is a wise institution established by God to realize in and for mankind his design for love. The chaste intimacy of husband and wife is “noble and worthy” and it is ordained toward their mutual perfection and to collaborate with God in the generation and education of new lives. ([PL 1] Quitorio 1996, 294)

Hence anything perceived to threaten this view such as “the use of artificial contraceptives” (ibid., 295) is morally unacceptable.

Subsequent CBCP discourse explains and deepens this fundamental teaching. Such discourse is found in the following sections that comprise the statement issued on the Fourth World Meeting of Families (CBCP 2002): (a) “Joint Pastoral Letter on Christian Marriage and Family Life,” 1 May 1976; (b) “Love is Life,” 7 October 1990; (c) “Save the Family and Live,” 13 July 1993; and (d) “Saving and Strengthening the Filipino Family,” 22 November 2001. Another pastoral letter dated 30 January 1976 discusses the characteristics of Catholic marriage: sacramentality, unity and indissolubility, and its unitive and procreative end ([PL 5] Quitorio 1996, 465–72).

Other statements explicate the theological foundations and pastoral implications of church teaching against contraception. The CBCP statement on the twentieth anniversary of *Familiaris consortio* points to the family as “‘domestic Church’ (LG [*Lumen gentium*] no. 11), the Church in the home, the smallest form of the Church, the Church in miniature” (CBCP 2002). Thus transformed into “a family-in-mission,” the family is called to undertake pastoral tasks described by the encyclical as: (a) forming a community of persons, (b) serving life, (c) participating in the development of society, and (d) sharing in the life and mission of the church (ibid.). In consonance with the nature of the family as domestic church missioned with these tasks, the bishops “therefore, fundamentally reject the assumptions that underpin the

government's population program. We also object to the lack of practical respect for moral and religious convictions that sometimes accompanies it. We forcefully reject the contraceptive, sterilizing and abortifacient means it uses" (ibid.).

In general, then, these CBCP texts show clear continuity regarding fundamental church teaching on the nature of marriage and the family and on the prohibition against contraception. However, one also finds discontinuity in the frames of reference used for this consistent church teaching.

Buckley (2014) and David et al. (2014) offer analytical tools to understand this discontinuity. Buckley (2014, 319) speaks of three varieties of public Catholicism, each with "a distinct set of advocacy goals and characteristic patterns of political rhetoric." These varieties—defensive reaction, comprehensive mobilization, and democratic preservation—are then illustrated in the RH-related discourse from various Catholic groups like the CBCP and academics from Catholic universities (ibid., 326–32). But this analytical tool does not prove sharp enough when applied to the CBCP statements and fails to uncover the discontinuity in their presentation. For instance, Buckley correctly points out that all CBCP statements on RH after 2010 exemplify the variety of public Catholicism he calls "defensive reaction" with its advocacy goals of "protect[ing] select church interests, particularly related to family and sexuality" (ibid., 323 table 1). However, when one reads these texts, one discovers that their arguments draw from "a broad agenda of Catholic social thought" including liberation from poverty as well as promotion of rights and health—advocacy goals that he associates with the comprehensive mobilization variety of public Catholicism. For instance, the CBCP pastoral letter entitled "Choosing Life, Rejecting the RH Bill" argues against the RH Bill not only because of its "anti-life, anti-natal and contraceptive mentality" but also because the RH Bill "goes against the grain of many available scientific data" and it neither "empowers women with ownership of their own bodies" nor "is necessary to stop overpopulation and to escape from poverty" (CBCP 2011a). Together with its reminder that "we [Catholic Bishops] somehow significantly helped open the door for EDSA I and a window of political integrity" (ibid.), its mixture of advocacy goals shows the CBCP discourse straddling between different varieties of public Catholicism.

Here the approach of David et al. (2014) using discourse analysis helps in analyzing such discontinuity. Their study's method involved surveying

position papers, press releases, and statements from prominent interest groups on the reproductive health debate, and analyzing how framing focuses on specific aspects of the issue and thereby "promot[ing] particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman 1993, 52, cited in David et al. 2014, 14). They identify three distinct but related frames: population management, reproductive health/responsible parenthood, and family planning (ibid., 89).

With this perspective, it becomes clear that texts from Cluster B issued earlier (1969, 1971, 1973, 1990) put church teaching within the population management frame (table on pp. 228–29). These texts acknowledge "the population problem" ([PL 3] Qutorio 1996, 397): "With our government, we can not help but be concerned about the demographic problems of our country; Vatican II and Pope Paul's encyclicals have committed us to them" ([PL 2] Qutorio 1996, 322). The texts even recognize the civil government's legitimate task "to bring population growth-rate under control" through the "Commission on Population" (ibid., 323); the need for further demographic studies "undertaken not merely on the national but on the regional and provincial levels, too" (ibid., 322); and the importance of "the type of collaboration [that] preserves distinction of roles of parties" (ibid., 324).

Within this population management frame, the CBCP uses church teaching to raise fundamental questions about government policies and programs. By referring to "the population problem" as "the problem of *the care of peoples*" ([PL 3] Qutorio 1996, 397), it points to the "attitude of selfishness and injustice" as being "at the heart of the problem of scarcity of goods" (ibid.). Moreover, it criticizes government for "the bias in the program for promotion of pills and the IUDs" and coercion on both health workers as well as clients (ibid., 398). It then reiterates that approaches that "make use of natural internal-control techniques, such as Basal Body Temperature method (BBT), Ovulation Method (Billings), and combined BBT and mucus method, to determine the pattern of ovulation" are "*a way of life*" that "works directly to strengthen the basic values of family life" (ibid., 399–400). At the same time, it denies that "we [the bishops] approve of unlimited procreation of children, or that we permit a manner of rearing children that is dictated by chance rather than choice" (ibid., 397).

Subsequent statements of the CBCP gradually shift from a population management to a reproductive health/responsible parenthood frame. David et al. (2014, 90) distinguish them as follows: "Reproductive health can

be viewed as a portion of population management, but with focus placed squarely on the importance of preserving health rather than stemming population growth.” This shift is reflected in the CBCP statement of 10 July 1990, “Guiding Principles on Population Control,” that puts greater emphasis on rejecting contraceptive methods advocated by government and advocates “Natural Family Planning as the only morally acceptable way of practising responsible procreation” ([PL 7] Quitaro 1996, 729).

Moreover, from the year 2000 onward, CBCP statements began to reject categorically any possible link between population and poverty; for instance, its pastoral letter against the government’s *Ligtas Buntis* (Safe Pregnancy) program refers to “serious economists and demographers [who] have long discredited the Malthusian myth that positive population growth stunts economic growth” (CBCP 2005). While acknowledging “social, political and economic pressures” on government (CBCP 2000) and the complex nature of poverty (CBCP 2010b), official church discourse enumerates its causes thus: “flawed philosophies of development, misguided economic policies, greed, corruption, social inequities, lack of access to education, poor economic and social services, poor infrastructures, etc.” (CBCP 2011a). It further zeroes in on corruption in public office and moral life with its statement entitled “Contraception is Corruption!” (CBCP 2012).

With this dissociation between poverty and population, more recent CBCP statements focus on the main concerns (“health consequences” and “rights”) and central issues (“modern methods of family planning and family planning education in schools”) characteristic of the reproductive health/responsible parenthood frame (David et al. 2014, 91–92).

With regard to the first issue, these statements reiterate church teaching by rejecting “the contraceptive, sterilizing and abortifacient means it [the government] uses” (CBCP 2001) in the name of health, both moral and biological. It echoes earlier statements, for instance the text of 8 December 1973, about “a radical and depersonalizing contraceptive mentality” that promotes “mechanical and chemical contraceptives which are but external means of control” and does not “lead to the development and maturation of individuals as persons” ([PL 3] Quitaro 1996, 399).

In the name of biological health, the CBCP recognizes the avowed aims of a legislative proposal: “maternal, infant and child health and nutrition, promotion of breastfeeding, adolescent and youth health, elimination of violence against women, etc.” (CBCP 2008). Medical claims are made

about the safety of contraceptives—“scientists have known for a long time that contraceptives may cause cancer” (CBCP 2011a)—or their effectiveness—“condoms may fail to protect from AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases” (CBCP 2010a). Moreover, other statements warn against “the documented abortifacient effect of pills, injectables, implants” (CBCP 2003) in the name of “science [that] has proven that some contraceptives render the mother’s womb inhospitable, thereby causing abortion” (CBCP 2010b).

The matter of rights—the second main concern within the reproductive health/responsible parenthood frame—has also taken center stage in recent CBCP statements. First and foremost is “the right of the unborn child” that the 29 January 1979 letter focused on “because abortion is now widespread and a shocking reality in our country, both in the rural and in the urban areas” ([PL 5] Quitaro 1996, 539). Countless texts typically speak of “the constitutional protection of the unborn child from the first instant of conception” that “is a legacy given to us some twenty years ago during the presidency of President Corazon C. Aquino” and, the bishops hope, “could be finally and fully realized during the term of her son, President Benigno Simeon C. Aquino III” (CBCP 2010b).

The second set of rights addressed concerns constitutional freedom of religion for Catholic parents and government health workers. Many statements insist on the right of couples to form families and “the primordial right of parents in the education of their children, and others” according to their religious beliefs (CBCP 2011b); hence the CBCP’s opposition to government-formulated sex education that is compulsory for all schools, including Catholic ones. Along the same line, health workers are told, “you have the right to conscientious objection” (CBCP 2005).

All this concern about rights constitutes the CBCP’s rejection of “sexual and reproductive rights” referred to in many legislative proposals, especially when accompanied by punitive measures such as fines and imprisonment for anyone impeding such rights (ibid.). This rejection is fueled further by the specter of coercion of health workers and clients during the implementation of the Marcos regime’s population programs.

The official CBCP discourse then has been consistent in affirming church teaching on marriage and the family. However, because of the shift in how this teaching is framed, different concerns and issues have shaped this discourse.

## **(Counter)Point about the Filipino Family**

Church teaching on marriage and family grounds the assessment of the Filipino family in all RH-related CBCP statements. As in many church documents, this assessment is often made in terms of lights and shadows, positive and negative qualities.

As early as the statement issued on 1 May 1976, external and internal threats to the family have been noted. Threats “from without” include “rapid changes in the modern world” such as moving to the city; the desire for a higher standard of living; limiting family size; and the lack of social support for the extended family, local customs, and traditions. Those “from within” are accepting a double standard for male infidelity and treating children as financial resources ([PL 4] Quitorio 1996, 464).

The more recent statement for the Fourth World Meeting of Families begins with “some bad news about the family”; among those mentioned, aside from legislative proposals seen to be against church teaching, are (a) “poverty [as] a very heavy burden,” (b) “materialist and secularist values,” and (c) “fail[ure] to be living examples of fidelity to Christian life and commitment” (CBCP2002).

As expected, other CBCP statements address this third internal threat concerning the unbecoming behavior of Christians. One finds its fullest treatment in the statement on *Familiaris consortio* (On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World):

“Family, become what you are!” For this to take place, the Filipino family has to become the focus of evangelization as the 2001 National Pastoral Consultation on Church Renewal enjoined. Today the family needs deep renewal so that it can be a more effective agent of evangelization. We must make every effort to ensure that the family is where the Gospel is first heard and witnessed to by the members. The family has to become a true school of evangelization, where every member first learns to participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church. It should also be a school of holiness. The whole family would then become a witness of the Gospel to other families and to the wider society. (CBCP 2001)

After hearing the bad news and the need for renewal of the Filipino family, one turns to the CBCP statements to look for good news. However,

one finds little good news about the Filipino family. The same 2 December 2002 statement that begins with bad news speaks of the good news in terms of the Christian family described in church teaching rather than the Filipino family (CBCP 2002).

One would then have to turn to the *Familiaris consortio* statement with its description of “the situation of the Filipino family” and recognition of Filipinos’ traditional high regard for family: “We are justifiably proud of our close family ties. In the family we find strong support and environment for our growth. We continue to value marriage highly. We firmly believe that children are treasures given by the Lord to be loved and nourished. We extend extraordinary care at home to our elderly” (CBCP 2001). Moreover, the Filipino family is said to have “contributed immeasurably to the development of Philippine society and the spread of the Gospel. Together with the Christian faith of most Filipinos the Christian family can truly be considered as among God’s greatest gifts of God [sic] to the Filipino nation” (CBCP 2002). At the same time, this pastoral statement is cognizant that “while we appreciate the closeness of family members, we need to correct the ‘closed family’ mentality, which makes of the family an idol to which the common good is often sacrificed” (CBCP 2001).

With these lights and shadows, the final assessment of the Filipino family in this text appears ambiguous. On the one hand, it states that “*the family in the modern world, as much as and perhaps more than any other institution, has been beset by the many profound and rapid changes that have affected society and culture* (FC, 1)” and that “*this fundamental institution is experiencing a radical and widespread crisis* (Novo Millennio Ineunte, January 6, 2001, no. 47)” (ibid.). On the other hand, it maintains that “[d]espite many difficulties the Filipino Family remains quite stable” (ibid.).

Although ambiguity marks any human reality, the ambiguity of the CBCP’s assessment of the Filipino family arises perhaps on account of an implicit ideal portrait of the Christian family used as norm. This portrait could be drawn as follows: husband and wife with children, living at home within a stable neighborhood and sufficiently supported by the breadwinner’s salary. If such is the case, one could ask whether this portrait provides the sole model of the Christian family or even whether the experience of Filipino families comes close to it.

Furthermore, the CBCP assessment of the family is ambiguous because it is incomplete and fragmented. One can neither deny the profound impact

of various contemporary social forces on the family in the Philippines as elsewhere nor the continuing importance of the family for Filipinos. But these various elements are not linked in its assessment to provide an overall picture of the Filipino family. What could have facilitated such a linkage would be a consideration of how in fact Filipino Catholic families have lived or, more accurately, struggled to live their Christian faith amid all the threats from within and without that they experience. But this absence in the CBCP discourse is glaring.

### **Toward an Integrated Discourse**

The general archaeology of RH-related CBCP discourse has shown the shifting frame of church teaching on marriage and family as well as the ambiguous assessment of the Filipino family. This shift and ambiguity have been contingent on the changing contexts and positions of other stakeholders; for example, the nomenclature of government programs and legislative proposals also reflect these changes.

Nevertheless, these characteristics contribute to a serious lack of coherence in the CBCP discourse between church teaching on marriage and the family and the assessment of the Filipino family. In particular, this incoherence lies not in church teaching itself but in the manner in which this teaching is brought to bear on the situation of families in the Philippines. As a consequence, the CBCP's role of providing pastoral guidance to Filipino Catholic spouses and families could be undermined if no such integration in church discourse takes place.

Toward this integration, church discourse would have to consider the following crucial points—the relation of a family's number of members with its quality of life, and the justification for different positions on marriage and family issues.

In relation to the first crucial point, the shift away from a population management frame in statements of the CBCP has led to a practical rejection of any possible link between population and poverty. The CBCP assessment of the Filipino family stresses poverty as a major threat to the family—poverty that “is caused by flawed development philosophies, plans and priorities, by corruption, by inequitable wealth distribution and access to economic resources and benefits, by poor delivery of social services, by unjust economic policies, and by imbalances in our political structures that favor the few and powerful over the many poor” (CBCP 2010b). Thus other

CBCP statements insist that “the funding and effort involved in promoting condoms should rather be used to fight diseases that afflict millions of people in our country each year, such as diarrhea, bronchitis, pneumonia, tuberculosis, cancer, hypertension and influenza” (CBCP 2010a).

This compassion for the poor, who bear greater burdens from unjust social structures on global, national, and local levels, is evident in many CBCP statements: “Economic factors threaten the unity of marriage. The forced separation of a husband from his wife or of both from their children due to overseas work is causing great suffering in the family. In all cases, the children suffer. In many cases they suffer serious psychological harm” (CBCP 2001).

But the spirit of this compassion for the poor does not seem to go far enough. Without subscribing that overpopulation is *the* cause of poverty, “the Church is in favor of responsible parenthood” and “means thereby that parents must plan the number of their children according to their capacity to raise a family” ([PL 4] Quitorio 1996, 471). However, no CBCP statement has invited poor families to even consider the possibility of limiting their family size using the church-approved method of natural family planning. The size of poor families plays a role in the quality of their life, as the Jesuit sociologist John Carroll (2007, 129) has stated: “there are indications that family size makes it difficult for families to emerge from poverty, the so-called ‘burden of dependency.’ This is reflected in other data showing that expenditures for education and health per family member decrease systematically as family size increases.”

Regarding the second point about justification for different positions on marriage and family issues, the shift to a reproductive health/responsible parenthood frame pushed official church discourse to defend its position on the grounds of the health of the human person as well as of the rights of different stakeholders. As a result, the church had to engage in considerations not exclusive to itself and in processes independent of its control.

For instance, which medications and methods are medically safe and appropriate for avoiding pregnancy is a scientific issue adjudicated by the scientific community and approved by government-mandated regulatory bodies such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Given the nature of scientific research, such empirical judgments are always open to revision based on ongoing studies and thus rarely unanimous. Approval of any medication or treatment for a particular medical condition simply

means the provisional judgment that benefits far outweigh the risks; hence contraindications are always listed in the information accompanying medicines. Furthermore, in the case of individuals seeking medical advice, medical professionals make an additional judgment that a specific medication or treatment is safe and appropriate for this particular individual (Francisco 2011, 58–63).

On this front, CBCP statements have consistently reiterated church teaching that abortion and contraception are morally unacceptable. To defend this position on medical grounds, they make the following claims: (a) contraceptives do not promote women's health, (b) all contraceptives are directly or indirectly abortifacient, and (c) human life begins at fertilization of the ovum.

The first medical claim is made by referring to “scientists [who] have known for a long time that contraceptives may cause cancer” (CBCP 2011a); the second by saying that “[t]hese artificial means are fatal to human life, either preventing it from fruition or actually destroying it” (ibid.). These claims are stated as definitive, and therefore appear as the monolithic and unqualified judgment of the scientific community.

Moreover, the second claim that all contraceptives are directly or indirectly abortifacient does not mention that all such contraceptives have received FDA approval and are currently available with or without medical prescription. If indeed they are abortifacient and therefore illegal under the Philippine Constitution, one wonders why no CBCP statement has campaigned against the FDA as well as all hospitals and pharmaceutical outlets that make these contraceptives available.

The basis for this second claim lies in the third regarding the beginning of human life at conception: “From the fusion of the basic cells of the father and the mother following the marital act, the fruit is already human” (CBCP 2005). As many CBCP statements rightly insist, this claim does not only involve biological but, more importantly, moral considerations also. Thus it is a more complex issue, as “the moral personhood of the unborn [is] a matter which many would consider an essentially-contested concept, meaning that it could not be resolved on purely technical grounds like the biological but involves differing moral and religious commitments” (Francisco 2011, 61). In recognition of these considerations beyond the biological and of its competence solely within the legal, the Supreme Court declared in its decision of 8 April 2014 that life begins at fertilization in accordance with

the constitutional prohibition against abortion (David et al. 2014, 112)—the position promoted by all CBCP statements.

Furthermore, the church has also had to defend its position in relation to the rights of various stakeholders. Aware of its right to speak out on social issues in the context of the constitutional separation of church and state, the CBCP statements stress the right of the unborn (CBCP 2000) and those of parents as well as health professionals under the rubric of the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom. Here too one finds a convergence between church position and the recent Supreme Court ruling on the unconstitutionality of certain RH Law provisions that threaten religious freedom (David et al. 2014, 114–16). In particular, these provisions concern the right of spouses to form families and to educate their children according to their religious beliefs as well as the health professionals' right to conscientious objection against practices not in keeping with their religious belief.

The CBCP's (2000) defense of these rights based on constitutional and moral grounds is linked with its rejection of what is described as “reproductive rights” derived from “a United Nations language which includes ‘termination of pregnancy’ and artificial contraception even to teens.” This rejection of a woman's “total right over her body” is based on “the religious and moral reality that God created all of us, men and women, simply as stewards of God, we are to be guided by moral principles” (CBCP 2002).

These discussions over issues involving medical claims and protection of rights, both constitutional and moral, reflect the unavoidable engagement of the church with all other stakeholders in other areas outside of internal religious matters. Although the church has legitimately claimed its right and duty to speak on the moral dimension of social issues, it must recognize that other stakeholders, including the state, also have commitments to this moral dimension. As Talal Asad (2003, 255) says, the appeal to the moral aspects of social concerns is not the exclusive domain of religion as the secular nation-state is itself “a complex arrangement of legal reasoning, moral practice, and political authority.”

Church recognition of the moral commitment of other stakeholders implies that there could be positions other than the church's that are also based on moral considerations. It does not imply any capitulation to relativism, but simply respect for the religious liberty of others enshrined in the Second Vatican Council's *Dignitatis humanae* (Declaration on Religious Liberty):

“all men should be immune from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups and every human power so that, within due limits, nobody is forced to act against his convictions nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in compliance with his convictions in religious matters . . .” (Flannery 1992, 800). Because of this right, which is not founded “in the subjective attitude of the individual” (ibid., 801) but “is rooted in divine revelation” (ibid., 806), “the Church, therefore, faithful to the truth of the Gospel, is following in the path of Christ and the apostles when she recognizes the principle that religious liberty is in keeping with the dignity of man and divine revelation and gives it her support” (ibid., 809).

However, when CBCP statements declare that opposition to RH legislation is “[f]ar from being simply a Catholic issue” (CBCP 2011a) but one based on natural law that is accessible to all, it presumes that the rejection of contraceptives is the only conclusion all must arrive at—a presumption belied by contrary positions of other believers, Christians, Muslims, and even Catholics. Even prescinding from other conceptions of “natural law” within the Catholic tradition as well as other alternative frameworks in seeking the common good, official church discourse cannot conclude that any divergence from its position “is the product of the spirit of this world, a secularist, materialistic spirit that considers morality as a set of teachings from which one can choose, according to the spirit of the age” (ibid.). This blanket imputation of moral error, even bad faith, on the part of all who hold contrary positions undermines the church’s desire to speak to all of Philippine society, “our Filipino brothers and sisters.” The net effect of this presumption has been

the erosion of the hierarchy’s moral authority and stature in society. The debate on the RH Bill provided an opportunity for Filipinos to disagree with and openly criticize the hierarchy not only about its position on the RH Bill but also on a variety of issues such as the Church’s treatment of women, the sex abuse scandal, and clergy involvement in partisan politics. Such criticism was extraordinary because Filipinos are generally deferential to representatives of the Church. (Genilo 2014, 1052)

In the light of these considerations, official church discourse needs to recognize the link between the poor family’s quality of life and its size

and to accept the possibility of contrary positions based on scientific as well as moral grounds. Only then can the church truly offer pastoral guidance to Catholics through an integrated discourse on its fundamental teaching and the experience of Filipino families as well as promote its position on RH-related issues effectively in the public sphere.

But given the Supreme Court decision on the RH Law issued on 8 April 2014, this change remains to be seen. With the court ruling (a) that the law was not unconstitutional but (b) that certain provisions, especially those involving conscientious objection from Catholic health workers and Catholic schools’ prerogative not to follow mandatory sex education for children, were unconstitutional, opposing sides have claimed victory (David et. al. 2014). In contrast to their previous strongly worded reactions, the CBCP’s (2014) “Pastoral Guidance on the Implementation of the RH Law” presents a straightforward summary of the court’s decision. It appears that conflict may yet resurface on another field—“on the ground” where law and life intersect.

## Abbreviations

CBCP	Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines
FDA	Food and Drug Administration
PL 1	Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Hierarchy of the Philippines on the Encyclical Letter, <i>Humanae vitae</i> , 12 Oct. 1968 (Quitorio 1996, 292–307)
PL 2	Statement of the Catholic Bishops on Public Policy Regarding Population Growth Control, 4 July 1969 (Quitorio 1996, 322–27)
PL 3	Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Hierarchy of the Philippines on the Population Problem and Family Life, 8 Dec. 1973 (Quitorio 1996, 396–400)
PL 4	Joint Pastoral Letter on Christian Marriage and Family Life, 1 May 1976 (Quitorio 1996, 464–75)
PL 5	“Thou Shalt not Kill” (A Joint Pastoral Letter of the Philippine Hierarchy on the Life of the Unborn Child), 29 Jan. 1979 (Quitorio 1996, 539–44)
PL 6	Post-election Statement, Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, 13 Feb. 1986 (Quitorio 1996, 621–23)
PL 7	Guiding Principles of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines on Population Control, 10 July 1990 (Quitorio 1996, 729–30)
PL 8	“I will make a suitable companion for him” (Gen. 2:18), Pastoral Statement on the Forthcoming Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 9 July 1995 (Quitorio 1996, 829–32)
RH	Reproductive health

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