After 14 years of unsuccessful efforts in Congress to pass reproductive health legislation, House Bill 4244: Responsible Parenthood, Reproductive Health and Population and Development Bill appears to have a good chance of passage before the current session ends. Despite the massive campaign launched by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) and its allies in Congress to prevent the Bill from coming to a vote, strong pro-RH support from many other sectors is turning the tide. The pro-RH discourse has featured unprecedented critiques of the bishops for their alleged failure to appreciate evidence-based assessments of social realities. After reviewing the contours of the debate, the paper attributes four factors as primarily responsible for the new orientation of outspoken and multiple challenges to the Catholic Church’s authority in the matter of reproductive health. A shift in power relations thus appears to be taking place featuring for the first time widespread resistance to the RH-related pronouncements of the Church and demanding that its natural law arguments incorporate empirical evidence and modern outlooks. These efforts to thwart the conservative thrust in the Philippine Church, fueled by reform-minded Catholics arguing for a more progressive theology, may well become a significant force challenging other domains of the bishops’ moral authority in the coming years.

Keywords: Reproductive health, CBCP pastoral letters, contraception, abortion, maternal health care
INTRODUCTION

Some 14 years ago in 1998 Congress began the debate on a Population and Development bill. Despite the Bill’s presence on the legislative agenda every year since then, the issue of providing reproductive health (RH) services to the citizenry has remained contentious and unresolved. The struggle continues with pro- and anti-RH forces in the last quarter of 2012 still fiercely arguing the merits and demerits of House Bill 4244: Responsible Parenthood, Reproductive Health and Population and Development Bill.

Resolution of the issue falls squarely into the hands of legislators in the two houses of Congress, who must vote for or against its passage once it clears third reading. For months during the First Regular Session of the Fifteenth Congress, opponents of the Bill prolonged the debate on issues already extensively discussed for 14 years, insisting that various points still needed clarification. Pro-RH advocates charged critics of the Bill with delaying tactics tantamount to filibustering.

Although the push for reproductive health legislation has been stymied for a decade and a half, current developments suggest that the tide of public opinion and government thinking may be turning. Despite fierce opposition led by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), long frustrated pro-RH advocacy groups are now guardedly optimistic about the Bill’s passage by December 2012.

An earlier version of the paper was presented at the Philippine Sociological Society Annual Conference on Technology Reshaping Society; Society Reshaping Technology, Naga City, Ateneo de Naga University, October 14-15, 2011. The data in this presentation have been updated as of October 2012, drawing in part on the contents of the Declaration of Support for House Bill 4244 entitled, “Human Rights, State Obligations and the RH Bill,” signed by 192 individual faculty members of the Ateneo de Manila University and released August 18, 2012. Dr. Mary Racelis is a Research Scientist at the Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University, and professor of sociology and anthropology at the Ateneo de Manila University and the University of the Philippines.
Why this positive shift in the dynamics of the RH debate? What does increasingly outspoken public criticism of the views of the CBCP on reproductive health show about changes in Philippines society? The emerging alignments place the Catholic hierarchy and its allies on one side, and government, civil society, and independent lay Catholics on the other. At the heart of the debate lie issues of credibility and ultimately, power relations.

CONTOURS OF THE RH DEBATE

More specifically, on one side of the fray are those who oppose the Bill, namely, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, Opus Dei members, Catholic school administrators, many priests and nuns, parish councils, and a number of Congressional Representatives and Senators. Among those who support the Bill are the sponsoring Representatives and Senators, women’s health, human rights and population NGOs, several organized community groups of poor women, government agencies like the Department of Health (DOH), Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC), the Philippine Commission on Women (PCW), representatives of some local governments, Protestant churches and Muslim religious groups, academics and students mainly from the University of the Philippines, Ateneo de Manila University, and De La Salle University, business and labor clusters, film and media personalities, and a few sympathetic but silent priests and nuns.

The main features of House Bill 4244 (and Senate Bill 2378) revolve around the right to health of the citizenry, especially of poor and marginalized women and families, and their right to plan the number and spacing of their children. Items 1-6 below have proven to be the most contentious.

1. Information on and provision of the full range of all legal (i.e. registered with the DOH’s Food and Drug Administration), medically safe, and effective modern methods of family planning

2. Modern family planning products and supplies recognized as “essential medicines” in the National Drug Formulary to facilitate volume procurement (based on the World Health Organization’s categorization of contraceptives as “essential medicines”)

3. Centralized procurement and distribution of family planning supplies through the Department of Health

4. Access to basic and comprehensive emergency obstetric and newborn care through hospitals adequately staffed and supplied

5. Age-appropriate RH and sexuality education beginning in grade 6 (amended from Grade 5)

6. Budgetary appropriation for implementation under the General Appropriations Act

7. Adequate number of midwives for skilled birth attendance at delivery

8. Capability building in reproductive health for barangay health workers

9. Conduct of maternal death reviews to analyze the causes of maternal deaths

10. Mobile outreach services in every Congressional district

11. Pro bono RH services for indigent women by the private sector/NGOs

12. Maximum PhilHealth benefits for serious, life-threatening RH complications

13. Sexual and reproductive programs for persons with disabilities

14. Effective partnerships among government, civil society, private sector

CONTRASTING PREMISES

The clash of ideas stems from the largely normative position taken by the anti-RH forces versus the scientific evidence-based stance claimed by pro-RH supporters. Asserting the Church’s ascendency in the moral sphere, CBCP President Bishop Gabriel V. Reyes, D.D., Bishop of Antipolo, underscores natural law as the justification for the Church’s position (“Defense of the Stand of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines on the House Bill 4244,” Paid Advertisement,

The following excerpts highlight the natural perspective:

Far from being simply a Catholic issue, the RH bill is a major attack on authentic human values and on Filipino cultural values regarding human life that all of us have cherished since time immemorial.

Simply stated, the RH Bill does not respect moral sense that is central to Filipino cultures. It 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. Some it accepts, others it does not accept. Unfortunately, we see the subtle spread of this post-modern spirit in our own Filipino society.

Human life is the most sacred physical gift with which God, the author of life, endows a human being. Placing artificial obstacles to prevent human life from being formed and being born most certainly contradicts this fundamental truth of human life.

It is parents, cooperating with God, who bring children into the world. It is also they who have the primary inalienable right and responsibility to nurture them, care for them, and educate them that they might grow as mature persons according to the will of the Creator.

The Pastoral Letter goes on to elaborate and cite its own sources regarding the CBCP’s difficulties with the Bill. First, it asserts that contraceptives are hazardous to a woman’s health and may cause cancer; second, the Bill will not reduce abortion rates nor prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS; third, the Bill implies that women own their own bodies without the dictation of any religion; fourth, there is no overpopulation problem, nor is population related to poverty; rather, poverty stems from flawed philosophies of development, lack of access to education, from greed, corruption and more (CBCP 2012).

Other RH opponents, notably Opus Dei economist Bernardo Villegas and colleagues, insist further that RH technology will lead to an increase in premarital sex and contraceptive failures resulting in unwed mothers and children without fathers. He contradicts existing survey data “that purport to show that there are many mothers among poor households, who regret having given birth to some of their children.” These surveys, he states, are suspect because they “are usually funded by international organizations that have a strong bias for population control.” Moreover, the finding that large families are poorer than smaller families stems, “not because they have too many children but because their heads are the least educated.” Accordingly, more resources should be invested in education, especially for women, and not in contraceptives, the use of which is “intrinsically evil” (Villegas, Bernardo, Evelina Atienza, Frank Padilla, Anthony Lunicao and 15 others. 2012. "No need for an RH Bill, Now or Ever." Talk of the Town, Philippine Daily Inquirer, September 16, 2012, A-16.2012: A16.).

On the other hand, pro-RH professionals and their allies defend their positions drawing on social, economic and medical evidence combined with experience on the ground. Their moral perspectives build on principles of human rights, women’s and couples’ rights of choice, and population-resources ratios. Since this empirical orientation is the one that is challenging the Church on RH, it is important to highlight the evidence and arguments emanating from the pro-RH advocates.

First, they see the urgent need to reduce the high rate of induced abortions in order to save women’s lives and improve their wellbeing. Access to all forms of modern family planning can help bring this about. Reality shows that an estimated 473,000 women underwent induced abortions in 2000, at a rate of 18 abortions per 1000 pregnancies. Twelve per cent of all maternal deaths in the Philippines in 1994, or 4 out of the 11 maternal deaths every day, were attributable to induced abortions (Juarez, Cabigon, Singh and Hussain 2005). Projections from the 2000 data estimated that 1000 Filipino women died in 2008, with 90,000 hospitalized for complications of abortion.

Maternal mortality rates (MMR) in the Philippines are much higher than in its Southeast Asian neighbours, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, although lower than Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos and Myanmar. The latest United Nations MMR figure
for the Philippines published in 2012 shows an alarming increase to 221 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, with now 15 Filipinas dying of maternal complications every year. As a result, the Philippines will not be able to honor its Millennium Development Goals commitment to reduce maternal mortality by ¾ to 52 per 100,000 live births by 2015 (Catholics Can Support the Bill in Good Conscience, op.cit).

Filipina women who seek abortions are married (91%), already have three or more children (56%) and are poor (68%). The reasons they give for risking an unsafe and clandestine abortion are that they cannot afford the cost of raising another child (75%), the pregnancy occurred too soon after the last one (56%), or they believe they already have enough children (54%) (Juarez et al. 2005). Because prior experience has shown that some hospital personnel deliberately delay attending to women suffering from post-abortion complications as punishment for their act, the Bill specifies that these patients receive emergency life-saving treatment and compassionate attention.

Young people too need accurate, age-appropriate sex education. Recent data show that teenage pregnancies (15-19 years) have increased from 39/1000 in 2006 to 54/1000 in 2011 (National Statistics Office 2011). Although ideally parents are supposed to instruct their adolescent children in sex matters, studies show that only 15.7 per cent of youth aged 15-24 have freely discussed sex with their parents (2002 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Survey). The rest rely largely on their equally poorly informed peers or the unreliable information found in the media and internet. Pro-RH supporters insist that age-appropriate, culturally relevant sex education at the elementary school level and in communities will help young people understand the changes happening to their bodies during adolescence, identify sexual predators, delay early initiation into sex, prevent early pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases among adolescents, and inform them on choices of family planning methods when they are ready to have children.

Babies already born will likewise benefit from the lower infant mortality rates that will accompany effective implementation of the Bill. With better maternal care the number of neo-natal deaths, or babies dying at less than one month of age would decline. The mortality rate of infants among women with less than two years birth interval is twice as high as for those born with three or more years birth interval. Neonatal deaths would thus be reduced through fewer low birth-weight babies born too soon after the previous child. Fewer newborns would die from tetanus infections after birth owing to the mother’s having gone for tetanus toxoid injections during her pregnancy. Better maternal care during pregnancy would highlight the importance of good nutrition for the mother, deal with anemia and iron deficiencies, and improve the management of complications - all leading to healthier mothers and babies.

National laws and international covenants likewise enshrine health care as a human right. Access to reproductive health including all non-abortifacient forms of family planning is part of the State’s obligation to “adopt a comprehensive approach to health development which shall endeavor to make essential goods, health and other social services available to all people at affordable cost. There shall be priority for the needs of the underprivileged, sick, elderly, disabled, women, and children” (1987 Philippine Constitution, Art. XII, sec.11). The passage of RA 9710, the Magna Carta of Women in 2009, further reinforced women’s rights in this sphere.


The reality of high fertility rates and a still fast rising population in the context of limited resources also affects sound economic policy and poverty reduction. Given the lack of an effective reproductive health program and only modest economic growth since the 1970s, the Philippines has fallen behind Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia in its demographic and economic indicators, and may soon be overtaken by Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (Pernia, Ernesto M. et al. 2012 “Population, Poverty, Politics and the Reproductive Health Bill,” Talk of the Town, Philippine Daily Inquirer July 29, 2012.).
The slower population growth rates of our Asian neighbours enabled them to achieve their “demographic sweet spot” early on. That is the point at which the working-age (15-64) segment grows faster than the young dependent-age (0-14) groups. The demographic transition, which the Philippines has not yet achieved, has in turn generated more human capital and higher infrastructure spending among our neighbors (Pernia. Ernesto M. 2012. “RH Will Help Economy Reach ‘Sweet Spot.’” Commentary, Philippine Daily Inquirer, August 15, 2012:A15).

At the household level, poor parents with large families make smaller investments in human capital per child than those families with fewer children. Pernia points out that average annual spending on education per student falls from P8,212 for a one-child family to P2,474 for a family with nine or more children, and average health spending per capita drops correspondingly from P3,389 to P582 (FIES 2006 and Labor Force Survey 2007). Yet, these investments in children’s well-being are crucial to breaking the vicious chain of intergenerational poverty. Children in large, poor families are thus likely to relive their parents lives of poverty (Pernia et al. 2012).

Pro-RH proponents believe there is a population problem. While they agree with the CBCP that improved resource distribution could help redress poverty and reduce income disparities, the length of time required for such a turn around would in the meantime victimize millions of poor women and children waiting for the political economy to change. Combining redistribution, reducing corruption and the like, must be linked with actions women and families can initiate on their own in the immediate future. Family planning is one of these actions.

Finally, RH advocates address other contentious issues. They cite reliable health data to dispute allegations that the contraceptives to be provided by government are abortifacient. They call attention to the Philippines as a secular state, with the separation of church and state preventing the favouring of any single religion over others. While natural family planning will be one of the methods promoted by the state, it cannot be the sole one despite the 85% Catholic population. Surveys have consistently shown widespread support among the majority of Filipinos for access to all forms of family planning and the rights of women and couples to choose their preferred method.

To the argument that taxes paid mostly by the Catholic majority should not be used to support RH policies that are unacceptable to their faith, RH supporters give a constitutional lawyer’s assessment: “Public money is neither Catholic, nor Protestant, nor Muslim or what have you and may be appropriated by Congress for the public good without violating the constitution” (Bernas, S.J., Joaquin G. 2012. “RH Bill: Don’t Burn the House to Roast a Pig.” Sounding Board, Philippine Daily Inquirer, August 6, 2012:A7).

These are the features of the public discourse facing Congressional leaders charged with deciding on the RH Bill. President Benigno S. Aquino III, who has repeated expressed his support for the Bill, has urged the legislators to reach a vote. With the amendments period now underway in both Houses, that day may not be too far off.

CHALLENGING THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS

While responsibility for voting falls squarely on the shoulders of the legislators, their views are necessarily affected by the arguments and undercurrents swirling around them. The increasingly strident debate on RH issues appears to have shifted from the disagreements of the past to open confrontation. Although criticisms of the bishops’ stand on family planning and reproductive health have long existed, earlier critics were often intimidated by the power of the Church. That situation appears to be changing rapidly as the debate has moved into the power arena.

How has this shift happened? What has enabled a Catholic society to coalesce and openly challenge the authority of its bishops? Answer? The reproductive health issue.

While historically there have been other times when the Church’s authority was disputed, notably the case of Rizal’s Noli Me Tangere being read in school in expurgated or un-expurgated version, the RH issue has drawn wider protests. These encompass diverse groups at all class levels.

Four developments in our 20th and 21st century history moving into the 21st have contributed to increased polarization on RH: (1) the
separation of church and state; (2) an educated, pluralist and democratic society; (3) the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council 1962-65 and the corresponding rise of the laity; and (4) President Benigno S. Aquino III’s support to reproductive health legislation.

The Separation of Church and State

The heritage of faith and authority that dominated Philippine society has played a significant role in the current debate. For over three centuries Church and State were one (1565–1900). The Catholic Church enjoyed a position of primacy in both the moral and governance spheres. Civil authorities carried out religious functions while friars exercised civil powers. In 1899, the Malolos Constitution incorporated the long simmering anti-clerical views of significant numbers of Filipino revolutionaries in proclaiming that “the State recognizes the liberty and equality of all religions (de todos los cultos) in the same manner as the separation of the Church and State.” Similar thinking appeared in forging the 1898 Treaty of Paris between the United States, and Spain, which stipulated that “the inhabitants of the territories over which Spain relinquishes or cedes her sovereignty shall be secured in the free exercise of religion.” With the separation of church and state further reinforced in President William McKinley’s 1901 Instructions to the Second Philippine Commission in 1901, the Catholic Church’s official presence within the government structure ended.

Subsequent laws applied during the American and Commonwealth regimes affirmed the separation of church and state. The 1973 Constitution stipulated further that “the separation of church and state shall be inviolable” (GeneralProvisions in Article XV, Section 15), and this principle was incorporated into the 1987 Constitution as well (http://www.chanrobles.com/article12.htm#.UHVidS6Tzdc).

Although removed from its state position, the Catholic Church’s moral authority nonetheless continued to dominate in line with the freedom of religion guarantee. Despite the entry of Protestant and other Christian groups over the 20th century, and the continuing presence of pre-Spanish Muslim and animist indigenous groups, Catholicism remains the dominant religion today, covering 80.9 per cent of the population (Census of the Philippines 2000). Interpretations of the separation of church and state have carried over into the RH debate.

An Educated, Pluralist and Democratic Society

Even as the Catholic Church has retained its virtual supremacy over the moral compass of the nation, its credibility in the context of the RH debate has been affected. As Filipinos experience on a daily basis evidence of widespread poverty, rising maternal mortality, masses of street children, burgeoning urban informal settlements, widespread environmental degradation and the natural disasters associated with it, resources unable to accommodate fast enough to the needs of growing populations, educated groups and organized poor women have lamented the unwillingness of the Church to bend on these RH-related concerns. While advocates do not claim that a good RH program can address all of these maladies, they feel certain it can bring a much higher quality life to the suffering poor.

Exacerbating the situation is the rueful assessment that where once the Philippines in the 1950s led most other Southeast Asian countries in its economic and social indicators, the “only Catholic country in Asia” (East Timor is a latecomer) has become the laggard. Population policies with their weak reproductive health components appear to be the significant feature differentiating the Philippines from its neighbours.

Indeed, distinguished newspaper columnists and others have expressed their views on RH in styles ranging from respectful to strongly critical of the bishops’ stands. The point here is that influential Filipinos, many of them Catholic, now dare to criticize CBCP positions openly in ways unthinkable 20-30 years ago. Some examples from the most widely read English daily, Philippine Daily Inquirer, demonstrate this new discourse:
Editorial, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*:
It was unfortunate that the highlight of the much-ballyhooed “show of force” the Catholic bishops organized at the Edsa Shrine last Saturday turned out to be a deliberate lie. “My dear youth,” ran the most emphatic line from the most provocative statement read at the rally called to protest the Reproductive Health bill pending in Congress, ‘contraception is corruption. The use of government money, taxpayers’ money to give out contraceptive pills is corruption.’ This is a fudging of the facts and of logic so extreme it may be appropriate to call it diabolical. …the statement is deeply dishonest [and] disregards the long tradition of Catholic social teaching (“Save the Innocent.” *Editorial, Philippine Daily Inquirer* August 6, 2012; A16).

Conrado de Quiros, There’s the Rub
In the end, that’s what makes the bishops’ opposition to the RH bill cynical and hypocritical. That they should call themselves prolife while seeing only hypothetical life and not real life, while bleeding only for the lot of those who have not been born and indifferent to the plight of those who have, while devoting all their time and energy and passion to something that was not, is not, and never will be to those who are here, who are flesh-and-blood, and who will ever remain in ignorance and hopelessness if their numbers keep multiplying. That is being for life? (De Quiros, Conrado. 2012.”Antilife.” There’s the Rub, *Philippine Daily Inquirer* August 6, 2012).

Rina Jimenez David, At Large
[Addressing Congress on the RH Bill] Just show up and cast your votes. And if you’re not so privileged as to be a legislator, follow the vote, and take note if the congressman or congresswoman representing your district voted to uphold our reproductive rights or to protect and privilege the power of the religious elite who want to keep women “barefoot and pregnant.” Remember their names, remember their vote in the House and Senate, and remember them in next year’s elections. (David. 2012.”Ninety Percent of Life is Just Showing Up.” *Philippine Daily Inquirer,* August 6, 2012).
Not all Inquirer columnists, however, were RH supporters:

Antonio J. Montalvan II, Kris-Crossing Mindanao

In the absence of such data [proper medical research], it is better to be cautious and not legislate through the RH bill the use of contraceptives to lower the abortion rate. It is better to advocate other methods such as promoting breastfeeding, chastity before marriage, and late marriages, which the government and the Catholic church are already doing. If the woman becomes pregnant, then the woman should be encouraged to accept the child as a gift and not as a burden to be aborted, and carry the child in her womb until birth; the government can assist here to reduce the maternal mortality rate through excellent hospitals and midwives. In this way, we can manage our population growth and at the same time reduce the number of abortions to zero without the use of contraceptives.”


The Second Vatican Council 1962-65 and the Corresponding Rise of the Laity

Vatican II unleashed new kinds of thinking and behaving for Catholics through its aggiornamento—bringing up-to-date, or “opening the windows of the Church to let in fresh air.” The Second Vatican Council’s orientation was ecumenical and inclusive, yet decentralized and celebratory of diverse cultures. The prior emphasis on “truth” gave way to greater acceptance of “subjectivism,” while the “certainty of truth” yielded to “seeking of truth” (http://www.mycatholicsource.com/mcs/cg/latin_mass_and_catholic_tradition/summary_of_changes_since_vatican_ii.htm)

The laity was urged to expand its capacity to carry out “its proper and indispensable role in the mission of the church” (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity):

Our own times require of the laity no less zeal: in fact, modern conditions demand that their apostolate be broadened and intensified. With a constantly increasing population, continual progress in science and technology, and closer interpersonal relationships, the areas for the lay apostolate have been immensely widened particularly in fields that have been for the most part open to the laity alone. These factors have also occasioned new problems which demand their expert attention and study (http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam_actuositatem_en.html).

Further guidance especially appropriate for professionals and academics, came through declarations like the one on religious freedom (Dignitatis Humanae) proclaimed by Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965:

Truth, however, is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue, in the course of which men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth.

Moreover, as the truth is discovered, it is by a personal assent that men are to adhere to it. However, in spreading religious faith and in introducing religious practices everyone ought at all times to refrain from any manner of action which might seem to carry a hint of coercion or of a kind of persuasion that would be dishonorable or unworthy, especially when dealing with poor or uneducated people. Such a manner of action would have to be considered an abuse of one’s right and a violation of the right of others. (http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html)

Academics in Catholic higher institutions like the Ateneo de Manila University took their cue from these defining statements and felt free to develop their evidence-based views in teaching, research and extension/community service. The university administration regularly encouraged them to discern how they could best enhance the university’s tripartite identity as Catholic, Jesuit, and Filipino.
Further definition of the laity's function in the Church emerged in Benedict XVI's August 24, 2012 statement endorsing "co-responsibility" as the appropriate lay role and emphasizing that this:

• Requires a change in mentality, particularly with regard to the laity in the Church, who should be considered not as 'collaborators' with the clergy, but as persons truly 'co-responsible' for the being and activity of the Church.” (Gandolfo, Castel. 2012. Pope Calls Laity to Responsibility in the Church: Says a Change of Mentality Is Needed. Zenit.org)

As the RH debate began to take center stage in public discourse, many faculty members felt that in conscience they should join other advocacy groups impressing for the Bill's passage. This sense of urgency stemmed in no small measure from the CBCP attacks on the Bill's provisions, citing evidence mostly out of step with modern thinking about technology and society. Especially alarming was the hierarchy's influence on some lawmakers, whose interpellations exuded statements incompatible with the academics' understandings of reality. Further accelerating the intellectual disconnect was the apparent unwillingness of the hierarchy even to consider contrary evidence in an atmosphere of open discussion with knowledgeable professionals. Despite sporadic suggestions and rare university-based discussions, the bishops relied on their unquestioned moral authority to serve as the determining factor in forming public opinion.

In 2008, 14 individual faculty members of the Ateneo de Manila University issued a position paper, "Catholics Can Support the RH Bill in Good Conscience." This was followed soon after by a Declaration of Support for the Reproductive Health Bill's Immediate Passage into Law,” signed by 69 individual faculty members and forwarded to Congress. Predictably, the documents were hailed by pro-RH advocates as progressive and important additions to the debate, especially because they showed that there were other, more liberal ways of interpreting Catholic tenets from an empirical analysis of societal development. Anti-RH forces condemned the documents as contrary to Catholic principles and demanded an explanation from the Ateneo administration. Fr. Bienvenido Nebres, S.J., President, assured the bishops that the University was not in favor of the RH Bill, but simultaneously asserted that the faculty signatories had a "right to express their views as individual Catholics" (Nebres 2008).

A similar dynamic emerged in 2012 when 192 Ateneo individual faculty released on August 18 a new statement, "Declaration of Support for House Bill 4244 (The Responsible Parenthood, Reproductive Health and Population and Development Bill). At the outset they announced:

We issue this call in our individual capacities as educators, researchers, medical doctors, lawyers, and citizens, and in no way speak for our University, the Society of Jesus, or the rest of our colleagues. As members of the academe who value academic freedom and responsibility, we wish to put knowledge at the service of national development goals that promote the wellbeing of the majority of our people. In so doing, we seek to ground our claims on the current scientific consensus and empirical evidence, including the lived experience of the poor and marginalized. We recognize that others who do the same may arrive at a position contrary to ours; however, we view the ability to hold and express divergent opinions on an issue as a sign of a vibrant academic community.

Ateneo President Fr. Jose Ramon Villarin, S.J. affirmed the university’s position against the passage of the Bill in its present form, but encouraged the faculty “to continue in their discernment of the common good,” and enjoined “all in the Ateneo community to continue in-depth study of the present bill.” (Villarin 2012).

The CBCP responded swiftly through its President, Archbishop Jose Palma: “If we are a Catholic school, we should not teach anything contrary to the official teaching of the Church.” Professors who teach ideas contrary to Catholic teachings “are confusing the students.” Added the Rappler commentator, “The Archbishop's statement raises questions on the role of Catholic universities in engendering critical thinking, which is expected of universities. It also reflects the Catholic clergy’s attitude toward divergent views, such as when RH advocates

Archbishop Palma elaborated in a Radio Veritas program. Beginning somewhat expansively, he said: “... the bishops are open to dialogue with the pro-RH bill Ateneo professors because we are all part of the Church and we are responsible for our actions.” He added, “For me, there’s really a need for a sincere dialogue because the professors, I think must be motivated by their desire to discover what is good. But the prospect of a level playing field for “dialogue” was dashed when he added: “They are part of the Catholic university and they should obey the mission and vision and not contradict the teachings.”(http://cbcpforlife.com/?p=8534,)

Father Melvin Castro, Executive Secretary of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines-Episcopal Commission on Family and Life (CBCP-ECFL), regarded the signatory professors as ill-informed:

_Mismong mga professors natin na very educated, it only goes to show na hindi pa din malinaw sa kanila ang nilalaman ng RH bill, “he said. (Highly educated though our professors may be, it only goes to show that the RH Bill is still not clear to them.) (Patinio, Interaksyon 2012)

Bishop Leandro Medroso on Radio Veritas called for an investigation of the Ateneo signatories in which those found guilty of teaching students concepts contrary to Church teachings could be fired for heresy. In this he echoed Archbishop Palma’s warning that teachers in Catholic schools should leave if they do not teach the official Church line (Alave, Kristine L. 2012.“Church Goes After Ateneo Professors for Heresy.” Philippine Daily Inquirer, August 21, 2012.)

The intimidation and threats revealed in the CBCP’s public reactions affirmed that it would be fruitless for university professors to engage in a dialogue with the bishops, since no genuine exchange of ideas could take place under such circumstances. At the same time, critics of the Ateneo faculty signatories’ position continued to make their voices heard. One Ateneo alumni parent vociferously attacked the faculty signatories and criticized the administration for its mild attitude toward them. The University of Santo Tomas Rector and its student newspaper published their critical views, as did an anti-RH columnist.

_Ricardo Boncan_, Ateneo de Manila University alumnus and parent

We therefore (1) denounce the continued misuse of the Ateneo de Manila University’s name by these 160 faculty members for their statement and stand on institutionalized contraception as it is contrary to Catholic teaching; (2) ask our Jesuit Fathers, especially those in the administration, to publicly settle this matter unequivocally and strongly for the benefit of Catholic students under their care; (3) ask that an explanation to all students of the Ateneo on the clear and unwavering position of our Catholic school and our Jesuit fathers, on the matter of artificial contraception be also sent to parents and alumni of the university; (4) ask that a clear, strong and resolute reprimand be given to those who wilfully signed that statement and made use of their position in order to voice their dissent to Catholic teaching.

The Rector of the University of Santo Tomas administered by the Dominican Order, the UST student newspaper, and an anti-RH columnist also weighed in.

_Fr. Rolando V. De la Rosa, O.P.; Rector, University of Santo Tomas, Through Untrue_

Every Catholic university worth its name teaches that part of the teaching function of the bishops is precisely to make pastoral judgements on doctrinal and moral issues. It is, therefore, never enough for a Catholic university to declare its adherence to the CBCP position on the RH Bill. It must see to it that its teachers do not uphold the contrary position (In Defense of the CBCP, Manila Bulletin, September 8, 2012).
If faculty members of UST and other Catholic schools feel they need to invoke their academic freedom to make known their stand in conflict with the bishops regarding the RH bill, then they're free to do so. But they must resign from UST. They must give up their Catholic academic affiliation....

It is quite gratifying that UST has cracked the whip and reminded its faculty members that they're members of a Catholic institution and should toe the line. ("RH Bill, Ateneo, and La Salle: Of lemons and Cowards,"LXXXIV(6)September 30, 2012http://varsitarian.net/editorial_opinion/editorial/20120930/rh_bill_ateneo_and_la_salle_of_lemons_and_cowards)

The controversy over academic freedom in Catholic universities likewise generated a lively discussion on Twitter and Facebook, projecting the debate worldwide. Again, prominent columnists defended the Ateneo signatories and took the bishops to task for their narrow interpretations of the proper role of Catholic universities. Ateneo students added their views as well.

Randy David, Public Lives
A Church that insists on total conformity with its institutional position on social issues, and threatens to investigate or expel those who disagree with it, risks inciting a backlash from its affiliated universities. The academe operates solely under the norm of reasoned debate, and the only force that true scholars respect is the force of the better argument. A university that commands its faculty to think alike is a shame to all academic life. In demanding from the faculty of Ateneo total submission to its anti-RH line, out of fidelity to its beliefs, the Church risks destroying the very thing that makes Ateneo a university—respect for reason.(David, Randy. 2012. “Ateneo and the Church.” Public Lives, Philippine Daily Inquirer, August 25, 2012.)

Raul C. Pangalangan, Passion for Reason
If any disciplinary action is taken against faculty members who speak their minds and the school tries to immunize that decision from outside review, then we have a clash between the institutional academic freedom of the school (saying it is entitled to define its own institutional mission) and the individual academic freedom of its faculty (who are entitled to the mantle of constitutional protection when they speak as scholars)... The Constitution protects academic freedom only for schools of “higher learning.” One earns that protection only by acting like a true university. Let us support the brave 192 signatories (Pangalangan, Raul C. 2012. “Institutional vs Individual Academic Freedom,” Passion for Reason, Philippine Daily Inquirer, August 24, 2012).

Congressman Edcel C. Lagman, House of Representatives, Congress of the Philippines
The Catholic hierarchy cannot conscript and compel Ateneo University professors to be docile adherents to intransigent Church orthodoxy against voluntary modern family planning and contraception by choice. Ateneo faculty members enjoy academic freedom because as the Supreme Court opined, a university professor is a “tiller in the vineyard of the mind.”

Joaquin B. Bernas, S.J., Sounding Board
Briefly, a Catholic university is not just an institute for teaching catechism.... John Paul II emphasized the importance of academic freedom:... “No university can rightfully deserve the esteem of the world of high learning unless it applies the highest standards of scientific research, constantly updating the methods and working instruments, and unless it excels in seriousness, and therefore in freedom of investigation.”

.... in the words of... Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach [superior general of the Jesuits]: “Far be it from us to try to convert the university into a mere instrument of evangelization or, worse still, for proselytizing. The university has its own purposes which cannot be subordinated to other
objectives. It is important to respect institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and to safeguard personal and community rights. (Bernas S.J., Joaquin B. “Understanding Catholic Universities.” Sounding Board, Philippine Daily Inquirer, September 3, 2012: A19.)

Editorial, The Guidon, Official Student Publication of the Ateneo de Manila University.

Ignorant and condemnatory statements have been made, invoking a rigid kind of Catholic theologizing completely out of touch with temporal realities. What’s more unsettling though, is how some members of the CBCP seem to believe that universities are merely channels of indoctrination rather than institutions that foster intelligent discourse (September 15, 2012).

Outsiders can only speculate that some bishops may have realized that the tide of public opinion was turning against them largely because of the authoritarian sounding modes of their pronouncements on academic freedom. By October, except for sporadic condemnations of the Bill and its advocates still launched by individual bishops, fewer anti-RH declarations appeared to be coming from the CBCP’s ranks, although its website continued the battle online. Accordingly, the debate has moved solidly into the legislature, which is currently hammering out amendments and compromises.

President Benigno S. Aquino III’s Support to Reproductive Health Legislation

President Aquino has consistently affirmed his support for the RH Bill but steadfastly taken a low-key role in its defense largely on the grounds that its passage fell within the aegis of the legislature. His predecessors took varying positions. President Ferdinand E. Marcos ordered the widespread distribution of contraceptives. President Corazon C. Aquino believed couples had the right to have the number of children they wanted. Protestant President Fidel V. Ramos recognized that the term population control was anathema to many and substituted population management as his approach. President Joseph Estrada supported family planning programs that included contraceptives. Under President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, however, only natural family planning was promoted by the government.

As continuous delays in 2011-12 plagued the progress of the Bill through the House and Senate, RH networks lobbied hard for President Aquino to designate it as priority legislation in Congress. When that did not happen, advocates grew increasingly alarmed. Contacting their allies in government, they emphasized that it was crucial he mention it in his July 2012 State of the Nation address before Congress. They watched with bated breath. At last, referring to classroom shortages, he stated, “Sa tingin ko po, Responsible Parenthood ang sagot dito,” he said (I think Responsible Parenthood is the answer). The instant reactions ranged from cheers to roars, the latter possibly from opponents. Although his reference to responsible parenthood seemed like a tangent, the impasse had nonetheless been broken. Responsible parenthood, the President’s preferred wording for reproductive health, was on the table.

Lipa Archbishop Ramon Arguelles reacted immediately, saying that the President’s public endorsement of the Bill meant, “Aquino declared an open war, a head-on collision against us and against the Catholic Church.” (Tubeza, Philip C. 2012. “Aquino’s RH bill Endorsement an Open war on Church, Bishops say,” Philippine Daily Inquirer, July 25, 2012)

Nonetheless, as the Bill continued to languish amid interminable interpellations and delaying tactics, on August 6 the President invited Congressional Representatives from the majority and minority parties to lunch to discuss the pros and cons of the issue. The meal ended with his commenting to the 180 guests that since the Bill had been extensively reviewed for many years, he felt it was time for them to take next definitive steps in the Bill’s legislative process.

The very next day, to the consternation of opponents many of whom were taken by surprise, the House of Representatives voted to close the debate and moved into the period of amendments. The Senate followed suit soon after. Clearly, the power of the President and his decision to apply pressure on the resisting legislators worked.
POWER RELATIONS IN FLUX

The polarization of the reproductive health debate with the Catholic bishops on one side and a assortment of civil society, government and private sector groups on the other has ushered in a new development in Philippine society—Catholic laity actually confronting the CBCP and telling them are wrong. Each set interpret the world and Philippine society from drastically different frameworks. While the battle lines are drawn specifically around the RH issue, and proponents still feel close enough to the Church in supporting the bishops in areas like the championing of agrarian reform and responsible mining, or contributing to fund raisers for relief efforts, the gap between submission to authority and the exercise of authority has been breached.

Given the thousands of maternal deaths annually, high levels of abortion, teenage pregnancies among sexually uninformed adolescents, continuing poverty and widening income disparities, population growth threatening the nation’s environmental resources and exceeding the nation’s capacity to provide basic services to all, both educated and less educated Filipinos dealing with that world find the Church’s traditionally normative approach wanting.

Its credibility has been eroded in other ways as well. The worldwide scandals involving priests in child abuse became even more shocking when bishops in Ireland, Europe and the United States among others admitted to hiding these aberrations from the public gaze all too long. Although Pope Benedict took a strong position in the matter, the equivalent has not yet happened in the Philippines, where secrecy still prevails. A number of the laity wonder whether the emergence of similar revelations are only a matter of time.

Moreover, despite the stated commitment to be the Church of the Poor, priests and bishops only sporadically visit informal settlers in Metro Manila’s teeming slums. When they do, they are treated as kings (ang pari ang hari) and kept at a respectful distance. Even if a priest actually said mass in an informal settlement, the small community-built chapels could not begin to accommodate the hundreds of families densely packed into the community. Women have taken upon themselves the mission of maintaining the community’s spiritual strengths through community prayers and mutual help in the best Christian tradition. Others join the fast-multiplying evangelical groups, whose workers are ordinary women and men trained to discuss Christ and the Bible, and whorelate its contents to people’s everyday lives.

Giddens (1979:49) brings in the useful concept of structuration for analyzing Church – Society relations, connecting “human action with structural explanation in social analysis.” Thus, social structure, made up of traditions, institutions, moral codes and established ways of doing things, can be changed when people start to ignore them. Structure, which can be constraining and enabling for human action, gives form and shape to social life. It is the repetition of the acts of individual agents that reproduces the structure. Agency is thus defined as the capability to exercise some sort of power, and is reliant on knowledgeable and competent human actors (Giddens 1984: 14). Agency constitutes the fundamental element to create any sort of change (Sarmenta, Hidden Violence, 2010.)

Repetitive Filipino behavior has contributed to structures of society affecting their social life. Thus, centuries of becoming Catholics have created structures in which Church leaders have established moral codes and “ways of doing things” that have gone largely unchallenged once integrated into people’s lives. But people also possess agency, meaning the capacity to change these structures and exercise their power by generating those changes. The ability of an agent consciously to alter his or her place in the social structure, also known as reflexivity is a significant element in human agency.

Reflexivity applies to those persons who in one way or another challenge the bishops’ authority in the area of reproductive health. Here are included journalists writing columns questioning CBCP actions, academics presenting their contrary views in matters once exclusively claimed by the magisterium, and grassroots women’s
groups who picket in front of Congress demanding the passage of the Bill.

For centuries and even today, considering the authoritative position of the bishops, parishioners have consented to the hierarchy's formulations for their "ways of doing things." In the RH debate, the bishops "instruments of knowledge," were incorporated into their understandings of their daily lives. The congruence of instruments makes the relation appear "natural" as the true and only correct way of thinking about the issue. This, Bourdieu maintains is hidden coercion through symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

Further, "power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are, but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eye of the beholder" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990: xxii). The power of symbolic violence lies in its lack of visibility. For those exposed to symbolic violence, the doubts and fears engendered cause them to question themselves. The victims are therefore left uncertain and confused as to what is happening, and become unable to articulate sufficiently what they are going through.... [F]or as long as such relations go unnoticed, they will remain outside the capacities of political deliberations or recourse mechanisms (Sarmenta 2010).

For parishioners wooed by pro-RH advocates to listen to their arguments, re-ordering their thinking separately from the knowledge instruments that they have allowed to dominate their own formulation may well leave parishioners uncertain and confused. Their first reaction when their comfortable knowledge instruments are challenged may therefore lead to: "Why don't you ask our parish priest about that?" The implication is that if the latter disagrees, then the unified knowledge instruments will be safely back in place in keeping with hidden coercion; if he agrees, he will reorganize the contents to fit the new instruments and his followers will acquiesce, with power relations maintained as before.

If instead, the parishioners should now take exception to the parish priest's preaching against the Bill at mass, for example, she can ignore him by daydreaming or dozing off. Alternatively, she can replace his message with a different one, like musing as to why not encourage a woman with six children who doesn't want another one to go for contraceptives rather than risk a pregnancy and a possible abortion? Still further she can reproduce an alternative set of understandings upon hearing the parish priest threaten political candidates with electoral defeat for favoring the reproductive health bill. Her response would point out that there is no Catholic vote to sustain his prediction. Until she begins to think for herself and formulate a different set of instruments, hidden symbolic violence will continue to define her life.

CONCLUSION
The Catholic Church in the Philippines is vulnerable. Its otherwise high credibility ratings in many areas of its mission is threatened by its adamant refusal to examine the RH issues more closely in the light of people's everyday lives. This it could do by examining the results of accredited empirical research and listening to those who have gathered and analyzed the data. In addition, it can talk as peers in community settings and learn from the people who must address the problem firsthand - poor women and their families.

Nowhere does this new era for the Church and skeptical Catholics emerge more strongly than in the RH debate. Yet, RH may only be the tip of the iceberg. Its Catholic advocates are seeking not only a victory in Congress but affirmation of their view of the need for a kind of Catholicism that diverges from long-standardized and rigid formulations to value new knowledge, new formulations, and new paradigms for finding Jesus. It recoils against hierarchical, authoritarian and gender-insensitive structures and leaders who demand obedience based on their status when the 21st century fosters dynamic horizontal relations and networks that initiate creativity, exploration and gender equity. Greater flexibility and a willingness to learn from evidence will go far to restore the deteriorating mutual respect between church leaders and the new Catholic laity.

Whether the Bill passes or not, the die is cast. The Church's authority has been challenged. If it clings to the mode of retaining its
position through coercion or symbolic violence rather than by listening and learning from a revitalized body of knowledge and interacting as co-responsible with the laity, then its credibility as the custodians of the Church Jesus founded may indeed suffer. In the end, everyone loses.

References


Patinio, Ferdinand G. “Not Alarmed, But CBCP Shakes Head at ‘Uninformed’ Pro-RH Professors from DLSU, Ateneo” Interaksyon September 5, 2012.


