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A female relative cries as the body of a Filipino killed in an anti-drug operation is carried away in 2016 in Manila. (CNS/EPA/Rolex Dela Pena)



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Models of episcopal courage can be hard to come by today, but the bishops in the Philippines have recently provided us with one such case. In a recent pastoral statement titled "Conquering Evil With Good," the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines broke its silence on the rising violence in the nation under the leadership of President Rodrigo Duterte.

Anybody remotely familiar with the state of affairs since Duterte took office in 2016 knows that he has encouraged a hardline "war on drugs" that has resulted in thousands of deaths, and he has taken a number of positions directly opposed to Catholic teaching on life issues, such as seeking to restore the death penalty and dehumanizing whole populations of people.

In response to the rising violence, you would think the bishops of the Philippines would be incensed, outraged and speaking out against what is happening within this overwhelmingly Catholic country. And yet, as the bishops themselves noted in their Jan. 28 statement, they have said practically nothing up to now.

"We are aware that many of you have been wondering why your bishops have kept a collective silence over many disturbing issues, about which you may have felt you urgently needed our spiritual and pastoral guidance," the bishops' statement opened. "Forgive us for the length of time that it took us to find our collective voice. We too needed to be guided properly in prayer and discernment before we could guide you."

Referring to the recent terrorist attack at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Jolo, the Philippine bishops recount their own mute witness, explaining: "For the past few months now, we have observed how the culture of violence has gradually prevailed in our land. The recent bombing of the cathedral of Jolo where scores of people were killed and several more were injured is a further evidence to the cycle of hate that is destroying the moral fabric of our country."

In finally breaking their silence, the bishops have signaled to their fellow Filipinos that now they are willing to move outside their comfort zones, from safety in silence, which is where some well-meaning people had encouraged them to stay so as not to also become targets of violence themselves, and into the spotlight of Duterte's fury. While the bishops can rightly be criticized for their delayed response, it's worth

noting that they have now publicly apologized for their silence and have sought to identify themselves with those at the peripheries — the poor, children, addicts and other vulnerable populations — who are most directly impacted by Duterte's violent "anti-drug" campaign. Duterte has even called for the age of criminal culpability to be dropped to ages 9 or 12, effectively charging children as adults in an already cruel and violent "war on drugs."

Pope Francis reminded us in his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* that all Christians are to be challenged by the Gospel, unsettled by the word of God in order to be effective "missionary disciples" in the world. "Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries' in need of the light of the Gospel," the pope exhorted.

While this evangelical move outside our comfort zones and toward the peripheries is a universal baptismal mandate, the pope regularly singles out bishops for their particular responsibility in each local church to renew their sense of pastoral leadership according to the foundational missionary impulse of Christian discipleship.

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It is clear that authentic pastoral leadership — that which leads one to go outside one's comfort zone and intentionally reach out to the peripheries of the church and world — requires courage and risk. The Philippine bishops have spoken clearly and critically against their government's cruel and violent policies. And given the public response of the Duterte administration to the bishops' statement and Duterte's reported calls for people to "rob or kill bishops," they are indeed taking a risk.

We can learn a lot from the bishops of the Philippines as they offer us a model of Christian witness today.

First of all, they admit their wrongdoing in keeping silence as thousands of their sisters and brothers have been targeted and killed by Duterte's policies and many others have been threatened by his rhetoric. It is extraordinarily rare to see bishops — individually or collectively — admit their errors, sins of omission in this case, and to then ask for forgiveness. In recent years, this might be second only to when all of

Chile's bishops offered to resign in the wake of the clergy sexual abuse scandal.

This acknowledgement of mistake, error or sin is something we can all learn from and emulate, but this is especially true with those entrusted with ecclesial leadership. Contrition is the correct starting point, particularly when silence in the face of injustice and violence has been the pastoral status quo.

Another important lesson from the Philippine bishops is that the risk Christian discipleship requires at times might result in dismissal, derision or even violence against you. In the wake of the bishops' public condemnation of the government's policies, and as I consider the persistent attacks from Duterte on the bishops, I can't help but think of the beatitudes: "Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And, "Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

It is not easy to speak the truth when the stakes are so high. We have extraordinary examples of those who respond to God's call and speak the prophetic word the world needs to hear; such is the case with St. Óscar Romero of El Salvador. But this is also something that we can adopt in little and big ways in our own lives as well. We can bear witness in our families, workplaces and communities by calling out injustices in our midst and staying silent no longer.

Perhaps the most important lesson we can take away is that, as the cliché goes, it is always better to be late than to never do the right thing. Inaction, silence and indifference all contribute to a spiritual inertia that makes changing one's behavior or perspective more difficult over time. However, the good news is that it's never too late to admit we were wrong to be silent, ask for forgiveness, and do what is right.

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