

Filipino bishops seek to stay clear of impeachment trial

N.J. Viehland | Jan. 25, 2012



Redemptorist Fr. Amado Picardal

MANILA, PHILIPPINES -- As 90 members of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) gather this week ahead of the semiannual plenary assembly Jan. 28-30, they are trying to stay clear of the impeachment trial of Philippines Chief Justice Renato Corona, which has captured the attention of the nation.

The bishops' conference isn't keen on issuing a statement about the controversial trial, which opened Jan. 16, and the bishops would prefer to see the matter settled by the impeachment tribunal and lawyers, conference permanent council members and commission secretaries told *NCR* in late January. They would prefer that discussion of the trial be limited during the assembly, they said.

For the first time, impeachment proceedings were brought against the country's chief justice. About a third of the members of the House of Representative verified complaints of "betrayal of public trust, culpable violation of the Constitution and graft and corruption" against Corona.

Corona must defend himself against eight charges, including his protection of former President Gloria Arroyo by lifting a travel ban that would have allowed her to leave the country for medical reasons and possibly escape prosecution for plunder and poll fraud.

He is also accused of failing to disclose his personal assets and account for judiciary funds as well as partiality in decisions involving Arroyo, her administration and officials. Arroyo appointed him a Supreme Court justice in 2002 and chief justice on May 17, 2010, just over a month before new President Benigno Aquino III was to assume office.

Aquino's spokespersons have said the impeachment is vital to the administration's fight against corruption.

Corona has denied the charges and said the Aquino administration and Aquino's Liberal Party conspired to impeach him to create a Supreme Court favorable to the president and the executive branch. He said the chief justice cannot be held accountable for decisions made by the court as a collegial body.

He said Aquino's public attacks against him grew "virulent" and House verification of its impeachment complaint came soon after the high court issued its decision last November ordering the distribution of

Hacienda Luisita, a tract of land owned by Aquino's family, to thousands of farmers. The distribution is part of a long-standing land reform program.

The bishops remain a powerful voice in this predominantly Catholic Southeast Asian nation despite last year's controversy over acceptance of donations from the government's sweepstakes office and criticism of a few bishops' support for Arroyo.

Days before their plenary assembly, bishops, who were meeting in small workshops, were not of the same mind on the impeachment.

Cardinal Ricardo Vidal said he sees the impeachment as part of a "rift" between Aquino and Corona. Vidal has reportedly tried to set up three meetings between the two, but the president did not show up. Vidal said in December he would stop trying to mediate.

Retired Archbishop Oscar Cruz and other clergy have supported Corona's opinion that the impeachment is retaliation for the Hacienda Luisita ruling and a warning after the administration's attempt to subjugate the judiciary. Lawyers have petitioned the court to halt the trial, but Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile told the court and the president's office in a radio broadcast not to interfere. He said only "military might" can stop the trial.

Hacienda Luisita beneficiaries have echoed Archbishop Cruz's concerns.

"We feel very worried about the possibility of an [Aquino]-controlled Supreme Court and we are grateful to have the force of CBCP-NASSA [CBCP's National Secretariat for Social Action, Justice and Peace] behind us," Rodel Mesa of UMA farmworkers union told *NCR*.



Fr. Edwin Gariguez, executive secretary of CBCP-NASSA, said the bishops' commission is "outside of the fight of [Aquino] and Corona." He said the commission supports hacienda beneficiaries because "we are pro-social justice and the common good."

Archbishop Jose Palma of Cebu and Bishop Leonardo Medroso of Tagbilaran said they recognize the impeachment trial as part of a larger effort to probe allegations of corruption and anomalies of public officials and to hold accountable those responsible. The bishops have expressed support for efforts to stop corruption as long as they are kept fair and just.

Palma, president of the bishops' conference, said the impeachment trial is already under way, and amid the ambivalent reality, "can we see beyond it and just hope and trust that the proceedings will uncover the truth about alleged corruption?"

"All of us [bishops] still believe in the separation of church and state, and that means all the bishops respect the rights of the state to run the country in regards to temporal matters," Medroso said.

Basic Ecclesial Communities for evangelization

Whether the CBCP plenary issues a statement on the impeachment trial or not, it is inarguably urgent that dioceses activate Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) for evangelization, said Redemptorist Fr. Amado Picardal, executive secretary of [the CBCP Committee on BEC](#) [1].

BECs are small groups of Christian neighbors who regularly gather for Bible sharing and the Eucharist. The

grassroots communities, which are united with pastors but ministered to by lay leaders, share a sense of responsibility for one another and integrate liturgy with reflection and action on socioeconomic concerns of the community, Picardal said.

"We have a split-level Christianity," he said, citing anonymous government workers who are "very religious, like Arroyo and Corona," but who have confessed to him about accepting bribes and kickbacks and their participation in other anomalies.

"A lot of corruption happens in the local level, and BECs can and have been able to stop these by monitoring the use of [community] and provincial government funds and money for road and other construction projects," Picardal said.

In 1987, a BEC he worked with in San Fernando, Bukidnon, fought to stop illegal logging that was causing flooding and droughts in the southern Philippines town.

"Even if Corona is found guilty and is ousted, it doesn't mean corruption will end if people, the culture and bureaucracy will not reform," Picardal said.

An acquittal will also mean people need to be vigilant because it will leave a lame-duck court of careful justices who have seen that people disadvantaged by their decisions could have them removed, University of the Philippines Law professor Prospero de Vera said.

Picardal was scheduled to report to the bishops after a Jan. 24 presentation of a university research on BEC and implementation of plans from the 1991 Second Plenary Council of the Philippines.

"Growing secularism" today is the reason the church is looking into evangelization, Medroso said. In the Philippines, "we see people going to church, but the vital question is, How much does their faith influence their important decisions in life? Are God and his commandments still important to them?" Medroso asked.

If there were to be another church-inspired "people power," it would be through BEC, which the bishop said was a timely pre-plenary seminar topic. He told *NCR* deepening the faith BEC "is our way to evangelize our people."

For the local church, getting BEC running in as many dioceses as possible would help address challenges to its work of evangelization. These challenges include institutionalized corruption and reported widespread use of church-banned artificial contraceptives in a country where 81 percent of the almost 86 million people are Catholics.

In Mindanao, southern Philippines, Permanent Council member Bishop Guillermo Afable of Digos cites the challenge to evangelize people deprived of justice and peace and suffering from calamities resulting from abuse of the environment.

[N.J. Viehland reports from Manila for *NCR*.]

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