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Philippines battle shows birth control isn't just an American issue

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NCR Today

The contraception controversy is often framed as an "American issue." It is no secret that overwhelming numbers of U.S. Catholics practice birth control -- and critics usually lump this in with the growth of secularism, consumerism and individualism, the American desire to "have it all" on our terms. There's the vague scent of selfishness and indulgence directed at Catholics who support contraception.

So what, then, to make of the Philippines? Few of the adjectives in the paragraph above apply to this overpopulated, poverty-stricken Asian island nation. And yet contraception is an issue there, too.

According to a comprehensive report in the *Los Angeles Times*, there is a battle going on in the Philippines that mirrors the American issue in some key ways.

First, some context: There is no doubt that Filipinos are extraordinarily devout Catholics. (The nation is 80 percent Catholic.) The *Times'* report notes massive traffic tie-ups in Manila on Sunday mornings as carloads of believers descend on local churches to celebrate Mass. Here in the U.S., especially in Southern California, Filipinos are widely regarded as among the most active parishioners around. (I once called a pastor friend of mine, seeking advice about fundraising and better participation at my parish. His first question: "Do you have a lot of Filipinos in your parish? They're amazing. Go to them first.")

Even with this, polls in the Philippines show 70 percent of the country supports a reproductive health bill now in the legislature there that would make contraception more widely available and affordable. Research shows half of all pregnancies in the Philippines are unintended, and its population is on track to increase by 50 percent by the year 2050.

But all those people are up against a formidable force: the church. Priests denounce birth control from the pulpit; the church posts billboards everywhere opposing the measure. The bill remains stalled -- a stalemate between church and state.

Contraception, then, is not just an American issue -- or a Western issue. It is not solely about easy targets like rampant individualism. In a devout nation filled with fervent believers, contraception divides the people in much the same stark ways it does here. But there, the issue is about health, poverty and the future of a very crowded group of islands in the middle of an ocean.

How the church responds there may say much more about how it will move forward than anything it does in America.

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