

## Moderation of Sin

### History

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It was Saturday, February 22, 1986, 9:00pm. The Philippines was in turmoil. Two generals had just betrayed Ferdinand Marcos, the long-time dictator the country, and the state was now hunting them. Millions of Filipinos waited in silence as Cardinal Jaime Sin, the Archbishop of Manila, spoke on Radio Veritas. He said, "I am indeed concerned about the situation of Minister Enrile and General Ramos... I would be very happy if you could support them now."<sup>1</sup> With this exhortation, over a million people gathered around a main highway, Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA), to protect the two rebel officials. The people rallied for four days. They prayed and committed themselves in this nonviolent revolution to oust President Marcos. This event became known as the EDSA "People Power" Revolution. EDSA epitomized the involvement of the Catholic Church in Philippine political affairs. Cardinal Sin's intervention marked the culmination of the Church's moderate protection of the human rights.

During the 1970s and early parts of the 1980s, the Catholic Bishop's Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) was divided into three main groups on the level of social activism.<sup>2</sup> The first group consisted of conservatives who supported the reforms of the Marcos government and had moderate criticisms. The conservative bishops felt that church activists were undermining the separation of Church and State in

the country and were thus reluctant to intervene. The second group was composed of liberals and social activists. The liberals protested against the Marcos government, the martial law, and the resulting human rights abuses. The third group was made up of moderates, led by Archbishop Sin. The moderates adopted a policy of "critical collaboration" with Marcos and criticized specific injustices of the government. It was only after Sin became Archbishop of Manila in 1974 that he would promote Church involvement in politics to protect the rights of the people.

On September 21, 1972, Ferdinand Marcos issued the Presidential Decree 1081, placing the country under martial law. Three years earlier he was reelected into office for his second term, and the Philippine Constitution only allowed two four-year terms for the president. He tried a variety of strategies to amass more power and to keep his office. He conducted plebiscites, where important issues were introduced to the people on the local level and the people could vote for or against a certain measure. During those plebiscites he asked the public if they trusted him and if they were open to a having a Convention to amend the Constitution and give him more power. Since the general perception was that he did a great job during his first term, with belt-tightening measures and effective public programs, the votes came overwhelmingly to his favor. After gaining such approval he began to point at his political enemies, labeling them as Communists. With such a threat, he could gain "emergency powers" if he placed the country under martial law, and he could have more clout in influencing the drafting of the new Constitution.

Five days after the declaration of martial law, the CBCP issued a statement, which says, "We are happy to read the assurance of the President that he was

<sup>1</sup> "The Voice of EDSA 1986 Remembered!," *Youtube*, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U\\_iN2kS600](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_iN2kS600) (accessed 2 May 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Robert L. Youngblood, "Church Opposition to Martial Law in the Philippines," *Asian Survey* 18, no. 5 (May 1978): 506-507.

concerned not to prolong martial law unduly.”<sup>3</sup> Instead of advocating for rallies and demonstrations, the CBCP encouraged the people to “remain calm and law-abiding, and to pray earnestly that God may guide our country’s leaders and the Filipino people.”<sup>4</sup> This support reflects the conservatism prevailing among the leaders of the CBCP at this time. The bishops trusted the government and did not necessarily view the martial law negatively. It was only after Marcos committed more social injustices that the Church would adopt a more moderate view.

Soon after Marcos declared martial law, his regime did not waste time in amassing more power and in silencing further his political enemies. He dissolved Congress and introduced a new Constitution in 1973, virtually giving him dictatorial powers and indefinite tenure of office until the “state of emergency” was lifted. He suspended the writ of *habeas corpus*, or the legal concept that one could not be punished without first hearing the case against him or her. He also seized television and radio stations to manipulate the media and present one-sided news. Naturally, opposition against Marcos grew, but he just sent his political opponents to jail. One of these opponents was Benigno Aquino Jr, a senator who led the party coalition against Marcos. Marcos, claiming that Aquino was a communist, imprisoned him for eight years and later exiled him and his family to the United States for another three years.<sup>5</sup>

Around this time the CBCP was generally conservative; however, many local priests and nuns were more progressive and were social critics. They soon began to protest against the abuses of the Marcos government. They paid the price: “[W]ith martial law a number of social action programs of the church came under attack and that certain priests and nuns were detained and/or deported for alleged subversive activities.”<sup>6</sup> By then Jaime Sin was serving

as the Archbishop of Jaro, in the island group of Visayas. Affected by the government’s aggressive campaign to attack and silence priests in his archdiocese, Sin formally began to criticize the Marcos regime in July 1973.<sup>7</sup> He would continue practicing this moderate view of social activism for the rest of his time as a Church official.

In 1974, Cardinal Rufino Santos of Manila, the capital of the Philippines, died. The Vatican soon appointed Sin as the next archbishop and cardinal. Even that same year, Sin already showed signs of his moderate social activism: “In November 1974, Archbishop Sin accompanied a delegation of squatters from the Tondo foreshore area to Malacañang [Presidential Palace] for a meeting with the President over the eviction and demolition of their homes.”<sup>8</sup> Aware of the government’s curtailing of free speech and prohibition against demonstrations, Sin also led a protest of 3,000 priests and nuns and celebrated Mass at the Santa Cruz Church. Despite these social criticisms, though, he still believed in a relationship of “critical collaboration” with the government, and did not merely dismiss Marcos.<sup>9</sup> Because of this, those who were more liberal criticized him. One of these was the journal, *Christian Century*, which reported,

Despite the trends, the church hierarchy hesitated to oppose Marcos openly, and Cardinal Sin vacillated in his approach to Marcos. Early in 1985 he accused Marcos of ‘indiscriminately, capriciously, and yes, even satanically’ using his detention powers to silence Filipinos. But in September, on Marcos’ birthday, he publicly returned the president’s warm embrace.<sup>10</sup>

This statement shows that Cardinal Sin was more of a moderate, despite his apparent social activist stance. Instead of merely being critical, he was mindful that the Church’s role was to condemn sin, not people, and to protect the dignity of human beings.

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<sup>3</sup> Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, "Statement of the CBCP Administrative Council on Martial Law" (Manila, 26 September 1972).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> "EDSA 1986 Part 1," *Youtube*, Documentary, (accessed 29 April 2010),

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cAWNScHA9cQ>.

<sup>6</sup> Youngblood, p. 509.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 517.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 510.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Gale, "Jaime Sin," *Biography Resource Center*, June 1, 2006, (accessed 26 April 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Audrey Chapman and Jay Lintner Smock, "After Marcos: New Challenges for the Changing Philippine Church," *Christian Century* 103, no. 21 (July 1986): 617-619.

By the mid-1980s, the Filipinos were restless about the condition of the country. Even though on paper Marcos lifted martial law from the country, he still kept most of his authority as the dictator. Inflation and unemployment were high, and the Marcos administration was taking advantage of its powers to gain personal wealth. The Pandora's box that caused this restlessness was the assassination of Senator Aquino. Sensing that Marcos's health was beginning to fail, Aquino dared to end his exile and return to the country. A sniper, however, shot him in the tarmac of the Manila International Airport upon secretly arriving from America. The people mourned his death and for the next three years the country reverberated with anti-Marcos sentiment.<sup>11</sup> His wife, Corazon Aquino, became a national figure, courageously challenging Marcos in the next presidential election. By then, the country was in a terrible shape economically. International banks were pressuring Marcos to prove them his credibility and support from the people. He announced a "snap election" to be held on February 7, 1986, a year before the scheduled election.<sup>12</sup> The masses, including the hierarchy of the Church, supported Aquino.

Although the Church supported Aquino, it still advocated for free and fair elections. In January 25, 1986, the CBCP issued a statement on the snap election. The statement criticized the past elections during Marcos's term: "It has been our sad experience that God's will has been flagrantly transgressed in the past though the violation of our electoral process.... They violate in a serious manner the dignity of human beings with whom the Lord has united himself."<sup>13</sup> The statement included more exhortations empowering different parts of society, including teachers, public school personnel, the military, the police, and those in the Commission on Election to keep the election free and fair.

February 7<sup>th</sup> came, and Marcos won. However, it was apparent that he achieved this victory by unlawful

means. The CBCP came out with another statement on February 13: "In our considered judgment, the polls were unparalleled in the fraudulence of their conduct."<sup>14</sup> The document provided a list of the crimes committed during the election: "disenfranchisement of voters," "vote-buying," "tampering with election results," "intimidation, harassment, terrorism, and murder."<sup>15</sup> The Conference then suggested a "nonviolent struggle for justice."<sup>16</sup> This shows that the CBCP had changed since Cardinal Sin became the Archbishop of Manila. Whereas fourteen years before, when Marcos declared martial law, the CBCP only advocated for prayer, this time it was encouraging the people to commit to social change through nonviolent protests.

Amid all these turmoil, a faction in the military was also dissatisfied with Marcos's fraud and corruption. Hence, the group, Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM), led by Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile and General Fidel Ramos, attempted to stage a coup d'état to seize the presidential palace and overthrow Marcos. However, they failed, since one of Marcos's close friend and adviser, General Fabian Ver, heard of the plan and reported it to the president. So now the authoritarian state was hunting down Enrile and Ramos.

It was in this context that Jaime Cardinal Sin spoke on Radio Veritas, the fearless radio station that was owned and ran by the Philippine Catholic Church. However, he did not necessarily encourage extreme activism to support the two officials. Instead, he still advocated for both prayer and nonviolent protests. In one part of his radio address, Sin said,

My dear people, I wish you to pray because it's only through prayer that we may solve this problem. This is Cardinal Sin speaking to the people, especially in Metro Manila. I am indeed concerned about the situation of Minister Enrile and General Ramos. I am calling out people to support our two good friends at the Camp. If any of you could be around at Camp Aguinaldo to show your solidarity and your support in this very crucial period, when our two good friends have shown their idealism, I would be very happy if

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<sup>11</sup> Sandra Burton, "Aquino's Philippines: The Center Holds," *Foreign Affairs* 65, no. 3 (1986): 524.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 525-625

<sup>13</sup> CBCP, "We Must Obey God Rather Than Men: Joint Pastoral Exhortation of the CBCP on the Snap Election" (Manila, January 25, 1986), 1.

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<sup>14</sup> CBCP, "Post-Election Statement" (Manila, February 13, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

you could support them now. I would only wish that violence and bloodshed be avoided. Let us pray to our Blessed Lady to help us in order that we can solve this problem peacefully.<sup>17</sup>

It is noticeable that his statement begins with an emphasis on prayer. It was only then that he promoted support for Enrile and Ramos, and even with this exhortation he did not order Catholics to do anything. He merely expressed his will, such as when he said, “If any of you could be around” and “I would be very happy if you could support them now.” He then connected this plea back to prayer to the Virgin Mary. This statement reflects his moderate view of social activism. The liberals would have used this opportunity to criticize Marcos directly and ordered the people to storm the presidential palace. Instead, Sin encouraged the people to *support* the rebels, *not attack* Marcos, thus ensuring the avoidance of “violence and bloodshed.”

Over a million Filipinos responded to the cardinal’s address. The Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, a major highway in Manila, was filled with people, priests, religious, and laity alike. Girls showered flowers at Marcos’s soldiers, in some cases even stuffing flowers into the soldiers’ guns. Nuns knelt down, in constant prayer.<sup>18</sup> While the CBCP under Cardinal Sin was moderate when it came to social activism, the females in religious orders were more progressive and critical: “There are only a few priests within the hierarchy who could be considered radical... [but] a considerable number of nuns and lay workers do subscribe to a radical position.”<sup>19</sup> A surviving picture from 1986 testifies to this and has become iconic of the Church’s involvement in the revolution. The photograph shows two nuns kneeling down, fending off one of Marcos’s soldiers. The two sisters stayed together, pre behind them.<sup>20</sup> Both of the sisters’ faces featured expressions of anxiety: one gasping and the other one frowning.

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<sup>17</sup> “The Voice of EDSA 1986 Remembered!”

<sup>18</sup> Sterling Seagrave, *The Marcos Dynasty* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), 415.

<sup>19</sup> Chapman and Smock, p. 618.

<sup>20</sup> “EDSA 1986 Nuns,” *Flickr*,

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/layamaria/3612208317/> (accessed 29 Apr 2010).

Despite the difference between the nun’s more hands-on social-activism and Cardinal Sin’s moderate criticisms, it was possible that the CBCP’s moderate stance inspired the religious sisters. In 1982, four years before the revolution, the CBCP issued a statement concerning Pope John Paul II’s visit to the country in 1981 and the beatification of Lorenzo Ruiz, who would later be canonized as a saint. The statement admitted that Blessed Lorenzo Ruiz was often described as a “reluctant martyr,” since he chose to die for his faith when he had no other alternatives.<sup>21</sup> When the nuns were kneeling down and defending the people against the soldiers, they were in a similar situation. Their natural instincts told them to get out of the way or else they would die. Yet they knew their faith was closely interlinked with their love of their country. In a recent interview, Sr. Teresita Burias, one of the two nuns, said,

Right after we finished praying the Rosary, the tanks started moving (nervous laughter). I guess before we went there we had already gone to Confession, so that whatever might happen, for the love of our country, I would find strength, that when I see the people I would feel this sense of courage, that I wasn’t alone—I was a Filipino, and I was going [down] with them.<sup>22</sup>

This testimony implies that Sr. Teresita was also somewhat hesitant at first, but finding strength in her faith and in her countrymen, she courageously stood up against the soldiers. In the CBCP’s document on Blessed Lorenzo, they also said that Christians are “reluctant missionaries, diffident, hesitant. But just [like] Blessed Lorenzo Ruiz, in the moment of truth, wholeheartedly gave his life for his faith, so too must we, even as we hesitate, begin to walk the painful paths of our own witnessing.”<sup>23</sup> The religious sisters did exactly this—their activism resulted from the CBCP’s moderate exhortation.

Despite the success of the EDSA Revolution, people critical to it might say that Cardinal Sin’s

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<sup>21</sup> CBCP, “A Church Sent: A Joint Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Hierarchy of the Philippines” (Manila, 17 February 1982), p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> “EDSA 1986 Part 5.”

<sup>23</sup> CBCP, “A Church Sent,” 3.

address on Radio Veritas undermined the separation of Church and State. However, looking at the situation from the perspective of Cardinal Sin and the CBCP, the intervention was an inevitable exercise of moral authority. The dictatorship of Marcos and his human rights abuses were moral issues that the Church had a moral imperative to stop. So, the root of the Conference's criticism of the Marcos regime was its moral culpability: "According to moral principles, a government that assumes or retains power through fraudulent means has no moral basis."<sup>24</sup> Although there was supposed to be a line separating religion and politics, the Church's moral duties prompted it to cross that line. Its actions were all directed towards *defending* the people and their rights, not *attacking* Marcos. Thus the Church cannot be blamed for intervening. In the bishops' own words, "If such a government does not of itself freely correct the evil it has inflicted on the people then it is our serious moral obligation as a people to make it do so." People during the EDSA revolution acted not merely as Catholics following the orders of the hierarchy, but as citizens of an afflicted country acting to regain what was lost to them: freedom.

Cardinal Sin's statement on the radio was thus the culmination of the Church's moderate social activism in the Philippines. Before he became the Archbishop of Manila and gained greater influence, the Bishops' Conference was more conservative, advocating for prayer and obedience more than social actions. Soon after he gained the office, Sin already showed moderate responses to the injustices of the Marcos government. Despite this, he was still criticized by progressives, especially by some liberal Protestants. Under him, the Church became the voice advocating for truth and fairness in the 1986 snap election. When it was apparent that Marcos won through fraudulent means, the Church quickly acted to criticize this abuse. Sin finally had the chance to encourage participation in the peaceful struggle when he spoke on the radio in support of the two rebel military officials. It was Cardinal Sin's moderate plea that caused over a million Filipinos, both religious and lay people, to risk their life for freedom.

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## REFERENCES

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<sup>24</sup> CBCP, "Post-Election Statement," p. 1.

APENDIX A



EDSA Re

"EDSA 1986 Nuns," *Flickr*,

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/layamaria/361220831>

[7/](#) (accessed 29 Apr 2010).