

The Politics of the Eucharist: A Critic of Duterte's Violent Illiberalism

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Abstract

This essay views the Eucharist as an alternative model of political enactment to Duterte's violent politics. It presents a critical reading of the vicious character of Duterte's manner of governance while taking the War on Drugs as the case in point. Drawing from the theopolitics of William T. Cavanaugh, an American theologian, I argue that the church, as a political body itself, has a critical political role to play that stems from its Eucharist viewed as an alternative political imaginary and enactment to Duterte's violent illiberalism. The argument is premised on the idea that both the church and the state have contesting imaginaries of the political, contrasting narratives of redemption, and different attitudes toward politics. Theologically speaking, the Eucharist, as a political enactment, offers a critical hermeneutical lens in assessing Duterte's violent governance.

Introduction

It is not unbeknownst among Filipinos that the Philippine Catholic church—hereafter, I will refer to as 'church'—enjoys a privileged place in Philippine society as an institution that gives them identity, forms and informs their culture, and promotes their values and morals. The church has a de facto socio-political position and role in society on the basis of the values it upholds and promotes. Yet the public and political relevance of the church often materializes indirectly, in the most case through the participation of the laity in politics. Typically, the church functions in the background of society that teaches moral doctrines even in the political sphere. Nonetheless, when the common good, social justice and human dignity are in jeopardy, the church's direct involvement in the socio-political affairs of the state becomes necessary – according to the church's view. This attitude was apparent during Marcos's marital regime in the early 70s until the mid-80s. The People Power Revolution in 1986 led to the restoration of Filipino democracy through which the church had a significant influence.

While the church is still seen as a moral and political authority in the postauthoritarian society, this position received a new challenge when Rodrigo Duterte took office as the 16th president of the republic in 2016. Duterte's administration receives high popularity among the

Filipino masses due to the economic developments and the order and unity that it promises. However, the reported human rights violations and the bypassing of democratic and legal processes in political decisions solicited criticism from several scholars and church leaders, locally and abroad. Since the church is one of the critical voices against the violent politics of the administration, it has become one of the targets of the President's condemnation. What is critical to note here is that analyses of the criticisms against the administration, the antagonistic response of the government against its critics, and the political sentiments of the people make apparent pressing questions concerning the nature of the church-state relationship, the credibility of the church to interface with the politics of the former, and the underlying tension between democracy and autocracy. This essay is a modest attempt to read Duterte's violent politics through the lens of theology. This essay argues that the church, a political body in itself, has a critical political role to play in society that stems from its Eucharist that is viewed as an alternative political imaginary and enactment to Duterte's violent illeberalism.

I will elaborate on the argument mentioned above in the light of the political theology of American Catholic Theologian, William Cavanaugh. This paper develops in three stages. The first section explains Cavanaugh's assertion that the *political* and the *religious* are analogous enterprise. Building upon the first argument, the second section elaborates on the view that the church and state have contrasting political narrative and political vision for society. In the Philippines context, I contend that these contradicting views became more ostensible during the Duterte administration. The third section expands on the argument that the Eucharist is an alternative political enactment to Duterte's violent politics.