

The Church in the Public Space (Part 2)

By Prof. Randy David

When does ecclesiastical meddling in political affairs go overboard? When religious authorities wield their religious influence or personal power over individual decision-makers in the secular order so as to shape public policy.

This would not be different from the work that professional lobby groups do. It has consequences. In a similar situation, the clergyman uses the authority of his ecclesiastical position to endorse or oppose a candidate's campaign for public office. The extreme expression of this would be a member of clergy running for public office, while retaining his ecclesiastical role. Although there is no legal statute or constitutional prohibition against this, the Roman Catholic Church, for one, recognizes that it is wrong. The vocation of politics, according to Pope Benedict XVI, properly belongs to the laity. When the clergy engages in the politics of the secular world, he says, they risk undermining their authority as moral shepherds.

There is obviously a very thin line separating, on the one hand, the mere expression of a moral position on a public issue (which is in accordance with the Church's function of educating consciences), and other hand, the mobilization of religious identity and authority within a strictly secular sphere.

So thin is this line that it is easily breached. And it has been breached so many times by ecclesiastical authorities in the Philippines as to constitute a big problem for the political system. We find that the clergy is often not satisfied with merely educating or forming consciences. In true authoritarian fashion, they are inclined to substitute the consciences of their flock with those of their own. But, it is amazing how we welcome this, especially when the bishops take a political position that favors our side in politics.

The restraint that keeps these two spheres apart often has to come from the State and from the institutional churches themselves. It cannot be expected to come from other less-developed systems. In pre-modern societies, the institutional church exercises so much residual social power that the temptation to use it is formidable. This is so very true in our society.

No one probably has been more conscious of this dilemma within the Roman Catholic Church than Pope Benedict XVI himself. He has said many times on various occasions that the exercise of prudence and restraint is the only way the church can preserve its authority within its own domain in a complex modern society. No one can fault the Roman Catholic Church when it makes pronouncements on the moral dimension of public issues. That is its function. But, when it starts to lead political actions, when it favors one set of politicians over another, or casts its lot with one regime against those who challenge it — it is in danger of becoming entangled in the conflicts of the temporal world. In doing so, it risks eroding its moral standing as a shepherd of its entire flock.

The same principle is true of any other denomination.

This editorial is taken from Prof. Randy David's original article entitled "The Church in the Public Square" presented during the ISACC Fellows' Gathering on August 26, 2011.