

10. Considerations for a Comprehensive Sex Education Grounded in Catholic Social Thought for Reproductive Justice in the Philippines

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In 2012, the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act of 2012, known as the Reproductive Health (RH) Law was passed, improving access to reproductive healthcare for women, requiring comprehensive reproductive health education (CRHE) in schools across the Philippines, while also granting universal and free access to contraceptives. The RH Law “recognizes the right of Filipinos to decide freely and responsibly on their desired number and spacing of children, within the context of responsible parenthood and informed choice, and to access needed reproductive health care information and services.”¹ However, the importance of reproductive healthcare is not a common value or perception in the country, nor is family planning, especially for poorer families. Children are perceived as retirement plans and future workers who will contribute to family income and take care of the parents out of *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude). Thus, while poorer families may not necessarily want more children *per se*, having more children is seen as another chance for the family to succeed, especially for poorer families with less economic means. Aside from the cultural perceptions mentioned, this law was met with fierce opposition from the Catholic Church together with those who held on to the more conservative culture in the country. Though there were some Catholic voices who supported the RH Law,

¹ Office of the President, *Executive Order No. 12: Attaining and Sustaining “Zero Unmet Need for Modern Family Planning” Through the Strict Implementation of the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act, Providing Funds Therefor, and for Other Purposes*, www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2017/01jan/20170109-EO-12-RRD.pdf.

such as those from the Ateneo de Manila University that argued that a Catholic can support the then-RH bill, most of the Catholic voices lobbied against it, citing freedom of religion, as well as opposing the universal access to contraceptives in health centers in the country.²

Contraception and reproductive health continue to be seen as sensitive topics in a country where 78.8 percent report themselves as Roman Catholic.³ After the RH Law was signed in 2012, it was challenged in court by Catholic groups, citing that it was unconstitutional, which led to a temporary halting of the RH Law from taking effect. Prior to the signing in 2012, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) released various statements rejecting the RH Law. In 2009, the CBCP reiterated the immorality of certain reproductive procedures such as abortion, ligation, and vasectomy, and critiqued the then RH bill on having "mandatory reproductive health education from Grade V to Fourth Year High School without consideration of their sensitivity and moral innocence," arguing that "the moral law and the Constitution recognize the right of parents to be the primary educators of their children."⁴ In 2010, the CBCP released another statement, stating that "the Church is not against sex education. But for reasons of morality and religious faith, we strongly object to the proposed sex education program. The program is devoid of any substantive moral and religious value

² Erika M. Sales, "People, President, and the Pulpit: The Politics of the Reproductive Health Bill of the Philippines" (MA Thesis, The Hague, Netherlands: International Institute of Social Studies, December 2012), 1–2; Marita Castro Guevara, Raymond B. Aguas, Liane Peña Alampay, Fernando T. Aldaba, Remmon E. Barbaza, Manuel B. Dy, Jr., Elizabeth Uy Eviota, Roberto O. Guevara, Anne Marie A. Karaos, Michael J. Liberatore, Liza L. Lim, Cristina Jayme Montiel, Mary Racelis, and Augustin Martin G. Rodriguez, "Catholics Can Support the RH Bill in Good Conscience: Position Paper on the Reproductive Health Bill by Individual Faculty of the Ateneo de Manila University," October 15, 2008, aer.ph/pdf/papers/RH_Bill_Ateneo_Faculty.pdf.

³ Philippine Statistics Authority, "Religious Affiliation in the Philippines (2020 Census of Population and Housing)," February 22, 2023, psa.gov.ph/content/religious-affiliation-philippines-2020-census-population-and-housing.

⁴ Arnel Lagdameo, "Reiterating CBCP Position on Family," *CBCP Online*, September 16, 2009, cbcponline.net/reiterating-cbcp-position-on-family/.

formation.”⁵ In 2011, the CBCP released another statement, focusing on being pro-life and the use of Natural Family Planning (NFP) as the primary method for reproductive health and regulation, critiquing the arguments that the RH Law advocates used.⁶

In April 2014, the Supreme Court upheld the RH Law in response to the challenges in court, though it did strike down certain provisions: “Health care providers will be able to deny reproductive health services to patients based on their personal or religious beliefs in non-emergency situations. Spousal consent for women in non-life-threatening circumstances will be required to access reproductive health care. Parental consent will also be required for minors seeking medical attention who have been pregnant or had a miscarriage.”⁷ The Catholic bishops had succeeded in limiting the scope of the RH law.

While the stipulations on CRHE are still in the law, and the Department of Education (DepEd) has rolled out a curriculum guide in line with the RH Law, advocates for CRHE critiqued the efforts as still being based on conservative values that imply that sex is evil and shameful, which hamper the very objectives of the initiative. There is still a fear that any form of sex education will increase sexual relations.⁸ Some teachers also prefer to stick to an “abstinence only” approach, while still believing that

⁵ Nereo Odchimar, “Securing Our Moral Heritage: Towards a Moral Society,” *CBCP Online*, July 24, 2010, cbcponline.net/securing-our-moral-heritage-towards-a-moral-society/.

⁶ The CBCP document disagreed that the RH Law would help reproductive health, lessen the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, and lessen abortion rates and overpopulation and poverty, while also empowering women and helping them be more responsible and take ownership of their bodies. Nereo Odchimar, “Choosing Life, Rejecting the RH Bill,” *CBCP Online*, January 30, 2011, cbcponline.net/choosing-life-rejecting-the-rh-billa-pastoral-letter-of-the-catholic-bishops-conference-of-the-philippines/.

⁷ Justin Goldberg, “Philippine Supreme Court Upholds Historic Reproductive Health Law,” *Center for Reproductive Rights*, April 8, 2014, reproductiverights.org/philippine-supreme-court-upholds-historic-reproductive-health-law/.

⁸ Julianne Joven, “Do We Actually Have Sex Ed in Philippine Schools?,” *CNN*, November 5, 2021, www.cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/Education/2021/11/5/sex-education-philippine-schools.html.

sexuality education should not be taught, thinking that sex education itself is a sin as bad as committing sex.⁹ Such an approach, however, does not take into account the harm of the “abstinence only” approach and its impact on the health of the couple, especially in adolescents who are learning this approach in school as the only approach for reproductive health and management.¹⁰

Access to reproductive health education, care, and services is crucial as part of the country’s response to poverty, as well as helping the youth’s well-being by decreasing incidence of teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. While the CBCP disagreed with the data in their statements, access to reproductive health education correlates with lessening the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases and better reproductive health, not just in terms of risk reduction but also helping young people develop and mature into well-adjusted adults with a healthy sexuality and healthy relationships.¹¹ Economists from the University of the Philippines argued that a government funded family planning program “has been a critical component to sound economic policy and poverty reduction.”¹² They continued:

⁹ Victoria La Bella, “Incorporating Sexuality Education in the Public School System: Perceptions from the Philippines” (M.Sc. Thesis, Amsterdam, Netherlands, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2014), 44–45.

¹⁰ John S. Santelli, Stephanie A. Grilo, Laura D. Lindberg, Ilene S. Speizer, Amy Schalet, Jennifer Heitel, Leslie M. Kantor, Terry McGovern, Mary A. Ott, Maureen E. Lyon, Jennifer Rogers, Craig Heck, and Amanda J. Mason-Jones, “Abstinence Only Until Marriage Policies and Programs: An Updated Position Paper of the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 61, no. 3 (2017): 400–403, doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.06.001.

¹¹ American Academy of Pediatrics, “The Importance of Access to Comprehensive Sex Education,” August 11, 2022, www.aap.org/en/patient-care/adolescent-sexual-health/equitable-access-to-sexual-and-reproductive-health-care-for-all-youth/the-importance-of-access-to-comprehensive-sex-education/.

¹² UP School of Economics Faculty, “Population, Poverty, Politics and RH Bill,” *INQUIRER.net*, July 28, 2012, opinion.inquirer.net/33539/population-poverty-politics-and-rh-bill.

At the micro level, large family size is closely associated with poverty incidence, as consistently borne out by household survey data over time. In short, poor families are heavily burdened when they end up with more children than they want (or can afford). Official data from the Family Income and Expenditures Survey (FIES) since 1985 have unambiguously shown that poverty incidence is lower for families with fewer children but rises consistently with the number of children Moreover, larger families make smaller investment in human capital per child—investment that is crucial to breaking the vicious chain of intergenerational poverty.”¹³

The need for CRHE is something that the Catholic Church should help meet rather than oppose. CRHE is in line with the Catholic Church’s teaching on integral human development, for women and families’ flourishing not just economically but also their fulfillment spiritually, emotionally, psychologically, and culturally. CRHE helps preserve the human dignity of people by protecting their human right to an education, which helps people discern more clearly their vocation regarding family formation. CRHE helps people understand how best to care for their families and themselves in community with other families. Even Pope Francis explains that “respect for those rights ‘is the preliminary condition for a country’s social and economic development. When the dignity of the human person is respected, and his or her rights recognized and guaranteed, creativity and interdependence thrive, and the creativity of the human personality is released through actions that further the common good” (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 22). The Second Vatican Council in *Gravissimum Educationis* also emphasizes the importance of “positive and prudent sexual education” (no. 1). “The Catholic Church has documents stressing the importance of autonomy and the right to education, requesting that information be accurate according to the most recent pedagogical, psychological, and didactic sciences, and calling us to uphold

¹³ UP School of Economics Faculty, “Population, Poverty, Politics and RH Bill.”

social responsibility, participating in the development of humanity.”¹⁴ Francis continues this call for holistic sexual education in *Amoris Laetitia*, advocating for sexual education that is appropriate to the age of the child and that young people “should be helped to recognize and seek out positive influences, while shunning the things that cripple their capacity for love” (no. 281).

To contribute to the work towards poverty eradication and the flourishing of women and families, this work thus examines how to teach a comprehensive reproductive health education from a Catholic perspective. I argue for the importance of a CRHE in line with Catholic social thought and outline some considerations in teaching a comprehensive reproductive health education grounded in Catholic social thought: 1) The importance of connecting sexual ethics with Catholic social thought; 2) The need to critique and address the way women and family are understood in Philippine culture and how it is taught in Catholic religious education; and 3) The value of teaching moral decision-making and discernment in CRHE, grounded in Catholic social thought.

A Comprehensive Reproductive Health Education in the Philippines

I argue for three considerations that should be reflected in the way the CRHE is crafted and taught, in order that the CRHE be aligned with the kind of integral human development that is taught in the Catholic Church. First, it is important that sexual ethics be connected more closely to Catholic social thought rather than be separated in moral theology and Catholic theological ethics. Second, there is a need to critique and address the understanding of women and family in the Philippines. Lastly, in

¹⁴ Mark Levand and Karen Ross, “Sexuality Education as a Moral Good: Catholic Support for Accurate, Holistic Sexuality Information,” *Theology and Sexuality* 27, no. 2–3 (2021): 2, doi.org/10.1080/13558358.2021.1872827.

teaching CRHE from a Catholic perspective, there is also a need to teach moral decision-making and discernment.

The Importance of Connecting Sexual Ethics and Catholic Social Thought

First, sexual ethics needs to be connected more closely to Catholic social thought. Sexual ethics has often been considered a taboo subject in the Philippines. There is a lot of *hiya* (shame) or awkwardness when it comes to discussing sex and other sexually related topics such as masturbation, pleasure, or what it means to engage in penetrative or non-penetrative sexual activity with someone. This *hiya* stems from the persisting notion that sex is taboo. Further, some mistakenly claim that a sex-positive approach (or even a willingness to talk about sex) is another form of lust that enables promiscuity. In the conservative culture of the Philippines, to talk about sex is sinful and wrong. Because sex and sexual ethics are often not discussed in class or in the home, misconceptions abound. Misinformation leaves space for abuse to happen, especially regarding lack of consent and unjust power relations. This has led to many unplanned pregnancies and abusive relationships and marriages. Some of those unplanned pregnancies end in unsafe abortions, as abortions are illegal in the Philippines. Meanwhile, domestic violence is commonplace.¹⁵

Aside from the awkwardness and shame in discussions pertaining to sex, the way it is taught is often in absolutes, without much nuance in terms of context and circumstances, due to the teaching that sins against the sixth and ninth commandment (i.e., sexual sins) have no parvity of matter,

¹⁵ United Nations Population Fund, “Country Programme Document for Philippines,” September 4, 2018, 2–4, www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/portal-document/DPPFACDPDPH_L8_en.pdf; Maria Paz N. Marquez, Elma P. Laguna, Maria Midea M. Kabamalan, Grace T. Cruz, “Estimating the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Key Sexual and Reproductive Health Outcomes in the Philippines,” *University of the Philippines Population Institute*, October 15, 2020, www.uppi.upd.edu.ph/sites/default/files/pdf/UPPI-Impact-of-COVID-19-on-SRH.pdf.

meaning that all sexual sins are grave matter, and never just venial.¹⁶ Sex is often seen as sinful and objectively bad, with no gray areas, but this classification of sexual sins as being all grave matter and the implications of saying such continues to be challenged, most recently by San Diego based Cardinal Robert McElroy.¹⁷ While the Catholic Church has done much in terms of nuancing and navigating the complexities of poverty, economics, and war in official church doctrine in Catholic social thought, there is much less of that in the area of sexual ethics. Much of what is still taught in Christian Living Education (CLE) or Christian Values classes is that abortion and contraception are always wrong, wrapped up in the language of intrinsic evil. While sex can be unitive in CLE, sex is still primarily about procreation. Reproductive health thus becomes reduced to having children, without much discussion on the pleasurable and unitive aspects of sex or even what happens in the period after having the baby, especially for women. Other opportunities to talk about reproductive health education, such as marriage preparation seminars (often called the pre-Cana seminar) for those about to get married in the Catholic Church, focus on natural family planning as the primary way of dealing with sex and reproductive health, while vilifying or rejecting abortion and other forms of contraception with not much nuance or discussion in these topics. This binary way of thinking finds its way into the labels of “pro-life” and “pro-choice” with often no room to nuance arguments that do not fall neatly into these categories. Such labels are often too reductive and unhelpful, and the extreme or polarizing ideas attached to these labels often discourage dialogue.¹⁸

To respond to this often absolute binary way of thinking, concepts from Catholic social thought help give more nuance to the issues in sexual

¹⁶ James F. Keenan, “Raising Expectations on Sin,” *Theological Studies* 77, no. 1 (2016): 165–180, doi.org/10.1177/0040563915620466.

¹⁷ Mike Lewis, “Reflections on the McElroy Proposal,” *Where Peter Is*, March 10, 2023, wherepeteris.com/reflections-on-the-mcelroy-proposal/.

¹⁸ Tricia C. Bruce, *How Americans Understand Abortion: A Comprehensive Interview Study of Abortion Attitude in the US* (Notre Dame, IN: McGrath Institute for Church Life, 2020), 4.

ethics and reproductive health, using the language of human dignity, justice, and the common good. Leo XIII, in *Rerum Novarum*, explains that consent may be coerced; such papal analysis is helpful in getting students to think about what consent is and what it really means to give one's consent not just in terms of their work but also in a relationship.¹⁹ Discussion of integral human development in Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio*, no. 14, or human dignity, rights and duties, and the common good in John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra*, nos. 11–34, 55–62, serve as foundations for the vision or goals of the human person, which include the roles of one's sexuality and sexual relationships in this vision.

Theologians have also developed helpful categories that connect sexual ethics more closely to Catholic social thought. Margaret Farley's work on just love is now considered a classic text in this regard. Farley helps develop an understanding of love and sex framed by justice, bringing out the aspects of relationships that should be considered when thinking about what it means to be in a romantic relationship with a person, especially in helping young adults understand what it means to engage in just sex and just relationships with others. Farley lists particular characteristics that mark just sex and a just relationship, such as the presence of free consent, mutuality, equality, commitment, fruitfulness, and social justice, serving as reflection matter for young adults in connection with the kinds of

¹⁹ Discussing consent in terms of work and the economy, Leo XIII discusses in no. 45 that state and society should "Let the working man and the employer make free agreements, and in particular let them agree freely as to the wages; nevertheless, there underlies a dictate of natural justice more imperious and ancient than any bargain between man and man, namely, that wages ought not to be insufficient to support a frugal and well-behaved wage-earner. If through necessity or fear of a worse evil the workman accept harder conditions because an employer or contractor will afford him no better, he is made the victim of force and injustice" (*Rerum Novarum*, no. 45). This paragraph highlights that consent is not simply about two people giving their assent to a particular set of terms but also the circumstances in how that assent was given, so as to be able to say that true consent was given.

relationships they have, both sexual and non-sexual, and how these characteristics are manifested in their concrete realities.²⁰

Another example from the US context is that of Mark Levand and Karen Ross, who also emphasize guiding principles for holistic Catholic sexuality education, namely anthropological justice, respecting individual moral autonomy, and social justice. First, anthropological justice entails a just view of how we as human beings exist and relate to others and with God, which includes the sacredness of our physical bodies.²¹ Second, individual moral autonomy ought to be respected, which includes “giving people the information they need to be informed when they make sexual decisions or being confronted with sexual problems in their lives.”²² Lastly, sexual ethics should be understood as an issue of social justice and not just individual private moral issues. Issues of sexuality and reproductive health are not just private decisions. They are also embedded within particular structures that can be oppressive and that are connected to other social justice issues.²³ These three principles are helpful because they link sexual ethics and reproductive health to foundational concepts in Catholic social thought. Doing so helps educators move beyond the false understanding that sex is simply private or that talk of sex is shameful and to be shunned. Issues related to sexual ethics and reproductive health are part of what it means to be human, and they are also issues of justice and the common good.

These examples are rich resources that can be further applied and enculturated in the Filipino context, given the *hiya* that often accompanies discourse on sex. It is important to make clear distinctions between sex and sin. It is also important for educators to discuss sex without shame. Doing so encourages students to be more open about discussing sex, sexual ethics,

²⁰ For more on these characteristics and the framework for just sex that Farley uses, see Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 207–244.

²¹ Levand and Ross, “Sexuality Education as a Moral Good,” 9–11.

²² Levand and Ross, “Sexuality Education as a Moral Good,” 11–12.

²³ Levand and Ross, “Sexuality Education as a Moral Good,” 12–13.

and their reproductive health, taking a more active and responsible role in understanding their body and their sexuality in their life. The principles of Catholic social thought encourage thoughtful analysis of complex topics, rather than an absolutist rejection of any form of CRHE whatsoever.

The Need to Critique and Address the Understanding of Women and Family in the Philippines

The underlying assumptions of the role of women and the concept of family in the Philippines also need to be articulated and reframed. CRHE is based on an understanding of gender equality, noting a difference in the two sexes but also rejecting an essentialist understanding of sex and gender, where particular gender roles are ascribed to certain genders. Likewise CRHE also rejects gender bias. Thus, implementing CRHE in schools requires more work towards gender equality and sensitivity when gender bias occurs, which entails “academically rigorous explorations of women’s experiences (family life across diverse communities, gender and society, reproductive health trends) in light of the mission of Catholic [educational institutions].”²⁴

The role of women, for example, is still heavily tied to child rearing and child bearing. This has an effect on CRHE because male students who hold on to this understanding of the role of women may passively accept their lack of understanding about women’s reproductive health. Men can absolve themselves of responsibility in ensuring the well-being of women and potential children. The Department of Education in the Philippines has been critiqued several times due to gender bias appearing in the textbooks being used for students as young as those in first grade.²⁵ In these

²⁴ M. T. Davila, “Catholic Higher Education and Student Formation in a Post-Roe World: A Proposal for Women’s Personhood and Reproductive Autonomy,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, no. 1 (2023): 120, doi.org/10.55476/001c.66246.

²⁵ For examples of gender bias in the learning material of students in Philippine education, see John Rey B. Java and Cristabel Rose F. Parcon, “Gendered Illustrations in Philippine Textbooks,” *Asia Pacific Higher Education Research Journal* 3, no. 1 (2016): 34–51; Christian Deiparine, “‘Archaic’:

illustrations and activities in the textbooks, women continue to be seen as emotional babysitters and caregivers, while men are seen as strong and smart breadwinners. Without addressing these fundamental assumptions of gender, CRHE will continue to perpetuate said assumptions, as well as the unjust consequences that said assumptions bring with them.

Theologians have much to offer in this work of challenging the understanding of women in the Catholic Church and in society. Theologian Emily Reimer-Barry reminds the Catholic Church and society to actively listen to women's voices and avoid disinterest and apathy. She advocates for reproductive justice as a framework for understanding women's voices and stories. She explains that "conceptualizing the inherent value of maternal life *and* prenatal life, the moral agency of the pregnant person, and the structural injustices that prevent pregnant people from choosing to parent even when they express ambivalence or sorrow about a decision to terminate a pregnancy . . . is not [all about abortion]."²⁶ Scholars of Reproductive Justice acknowledge that reproduction is not just a private, biological endeavor. Rather, "nations, political parties, religious and ethnic groups, and other entities claim a stake in reproduction—who should have sex, who should give birth, who should be born, and who should not. These claims turn an intensely private human activity into a matter of public concern, sometimes a public obsession...[that is] deeply politicized."²⁷

Theologian Rachel Joyce Marie Sanchez also shows how women's wisdom is a crucial part of a just ecclesial and social framework through a

DepEd Official Says Materials with Gender Stereotypes Should Not Be Taught to Students," *Philstar.com*, October 21, 2020, www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/10/21/2051257/archaic-deped-official-says-materials-gender-stereotypes-should-not-be-taught-students.

²⁶ Emily Reimer-Barry, "Wisdom from a Reproductive Justice Framework," *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, no. 1 (2023): 133, doi.org/10.55476/001c.66249.

²⁷ Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 168.

power-with-others structure.²⁸ In CRHE, reproductive justice is vital in ensuring that women are not just reduced to their procreative potential. A power-with-others framework such as the one Sanchez argues for is helpful in ensuring that women are not ignored in situations where they are heavily affected and that their voices are taken seriously regarding issues and policies that affect them.

One of the key challenges in teaching CRHE is the lack of male interest. Men do have an important role in reproductive justice. However, “Men often do not feel that this is an important topic to learn about because it is more about the woman and her body since she is the one who ultimately gives birth to the child.”²⁹ While this appears to be a positive development because it acknowledges the woman’s autonomy and voice in terms of reproduction, it can prove detrimental to the woman’s health if she has a male partner who is not sensitive to or conscious of her reproductive health. Men may, consciously or unconsciously, work against women’s reproductive health and gender equality due to lack of knowledge or care. The value of CRHE for men, as well as the role of men in CRHE, is thus an important part of crafting an effective CRHE. CRHE is not just about the reproductive health of women devoid of context, but rather CRHE is about reproductive health of people in connection to their relationships with their partners and families.³⁰ If done appropriately, a CRHE that engages men in healthy and respectful ways will foster a healthier relationship discernment. When all sexually active persons are educated and well-informed, this has positive effects for the family’s health overall and is just for all involved.³¹

²⁸ Rachel Joyce Marie O. Sanchez, “Where Is Women’s Wisdom in the Life of the Church?: A Feminist Perspective on the International Theological Commission’s ‘Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church,’” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32, no. 2 (2016): 27–43.

²⁹ La Bella, “Incorporating Sexuality Education in the Public School System,” 53.

³⁰ See Hoon Choi, “Fatherhood, Reproductive Justice, and Strategic Invisibility of Men,” 122–147, in this volume.

³¹ “Policymakers and practitioners reported that greater men’s involvement would result in a range of benefits for maternal and child health, primarily through greater access to services and

Assumptions about the family in the Philippines are intimately tied to the reproductive health policies and initiatives in the country, given that the family is seen as inviolable and the basic social institution. However, while it is good that the family is seen as deserving of care, the understanding of particular gender roles within family life is still restrictive. The concept of “mother” in the Philippines reflects the assumption that she stays at home to take care of the children, while the “father” is the one who is the breadwinner of the family. A man who stays at home to take care of children may be seen as “weak” or “less of a man,” especially if it is the woman who is making the money. Women who also prioritize their careers are seen as too “bossy” and are met with disapproval if they focus on careers instead of starting or raising a family. They are often met with questions of when they will “get married, settle down, and start a family” or “have children.” Family is also still seen as traditionally a mother, father, children, and extended family, such as aunts and uncles, grandparents, cousins, and nieces and nephews. The reception of LGBTQ+ persons in relation to family is also not yet fully welcome.

In a developing country such as the Philippines where many still live below the poverty line, there is also a sense of judgement made on women who have children as single mothers. They were not “responsible” because their parenthood does not fit the standard of what a traditional family

interventions for women and children. . . . There was wide agreement that increasing the engagement of men in MCH is important and would yield considerable health and other benefits for families. Many participants emphasized men’s cultural role in decision-making regarding access [to healthcare]. They highlighted the many potential benefits of giving men information to inform their decision-making about family health matters. . . . Participants in this study also reported beliefs that including men in MCH services may have benefits for men’s own health. In many settings, men have very little contact with the formal health system, particularly for preventative services, and prefer to seek curative services from a traditional healer or pharmacy. For men, as for women, pregnancy and early childhood provides an opportunity to link parents to the health system. Jessica Davis, Joseph Vyankandondera, Stanley Luchters, David Simon, and Wendy Holmes, “Male Involvement in Reproductive, Maternal and Child Health: A Qualitative Study of Policymaker and Practitioner Perspectives in the Pacific,” *Reproductive Health* 13, no. 1 (2016): 81, doi.org/10.1186/s12978-016-0184-2.

looks like. This is even the case when a young woman does not desire single parenthood but experiences abandonment by the father of her child.³² Many families also have someone, either one parent or both, or one of the children, who works abroad as an overseas Filipino worker (OFW), and so many families have either just one parent at home functioning almost as a single parent, while the other is away to earn money for the family, or have even both parents earning money, while the child or children stay with relatives such as aunts or uncles, or grandparents. Because of the structures of poverty that many Filipinos find themselves trapped in, the poor are also accused of being irresponsible and hypersexual, having too many children that they can't afford to feed, and thus are accused of reproductive injustice and in need of reproductive health and values education.³³ For the poor, the children are seen as an extra pair of hands to work for the family and a possible ticket out of poverty; for others, it is seen as the reason why the poor remain poor, becoming an easy way to blame the poor for their situation and further stigmatize their condition. Ascribing agency to poor families without attention to the social conditions in which they make decisions also serves to exonerate more powerful others (including policy-makers) who are in a position to help. While the parents in the family are seen as the primary educators of children, as mentioned by the CBCP in their statements, in practice, parents often leave the education of their children to their schools, due to this setup of having to work and earn money for the family, coupled with the *hiya* of having to discuss topics related to sex and reproduction.

We must, then, connect the concept of family and the concept of integral human development, both categories within Catholic social thought that are underdeveloped in Catholic sexual ethics. Theologian Herman Bavinck makes the case for the importance of family as essential

³² See Kathryn Lilla Cox, "Reproductive Injustice as Social Sin: Mapping Sin Discourse into Debates about Fertility Decisions," in this volume.

³³ See Karen Peterson-Iyer, "Reproductive Justice and Agricultural Labor Migrants," 257–289, in this volume.

to integral human development, where a person is first formed and nurtured—“a person’s becoming [integrally] human occurs within the home; here the foundation is laid for the forming of the future [person]...in the Kingdom of God.”³⁴ Integral human development challenges the narrow definitions and gender roles by changing the questions and priorities of the conversation, becoming more inclusive of the LGBTQ+ and single parents. Rather than focusing on the configuration of the family unit or particular gender roles, the question shifts to how members of the family help each other towards their flourishing, given the age-appropriate rights and responsibilities of each person in the family unit. As reproductive justice is concerned with the human right and duty to care for children in an appropriately safe environment, access to key resources and support are also needed to help families become spaces of integral human development.

Integral human development also challenges the preconceived notion that the poor are just irresponsible in matters of the family, reproductive health, or sexual ethics. Together with reproductive justice, integral human development also takes into account the context that families find themselves in and how said context interacts with the families and their decisions. Understanding the different structures at work, how these interact with families, and how they balance different goods and values at stake confronts our assumptions of how people discern, what is in their consciences, and why and how certain people decided in a particular way. It helps us understand how to respond appropriately, in ways that genuinely help people, especially women, towards reproductive justice and reproductive health.

³⁴ Eduardo Echeverria, “Bavinck on the Family and Integral Human Development,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 16, no. 1 (2013): 219, 224–225.

The Value of Teaching Moral Decision-Making and Discernment in Comprehensive Reproductive Health Education

Lastly, in teaching CRHE, it is important to remember that the pedagogy and morality to be used are not simply a transmission of knowledge or doctrine but rather journeying with the students in helping them exercise their freedom in ways that promote flourishing and the common good through discernment. Discernment here offers a framework or paradigm for people to make decisions before God, where the possible options are different but potentially good, by looking at one's desires, thoughts, and movements and tendencies within the self.³⁵ "Education includes encouraging the responsible use of freedom to face issues with good sense and intelligence. It involves forming persons who readily understand that their own lives, and the life of the community, are in their hands" (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 262). Having concepts and the language from Catholic social thought, as well as a better understanding of the role of women and the family helps people have a more robust foundation for their moral decision-making when it comes to sexual ethics in CRHE, cognizant of the fact that Catholic schools have a hand in forming consciences but do not and should not replace consciences (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 37). The bishops have a duty to assist in conscience formation, but they overstep their legitimate authority when they seek to dictate to the consciences of the faithful.

The teachers tasked to teach CRHE or anything related to sex and sexual ethics fear that they are ill-equipped to teach such matters and fear that they will say the wrong thing.³⁶ Shifting the understanding from teaching doctrine to helping students discern and understand themselves,

³⁵ This definition leans heavily on the concept of discernment in Ignatian spirituality but is still open to other spiritualities. For a short and accessible discussion on Ignatian discernment, see Reynaldo Belfort Pierrilus, "Jesuit 101: Finding Our Way Through Ignatian Discernment," *The Jesuit Post*, November 5, 2021, thejesuitpost.org/2021/11/jesuit-101-finding-our-way-through-ignatian-discernment/.

³⁶ La Bella, "Incorporating Sexuality Education in the Public School System," 51.

including their bodies, allows them to mature and develop their freedom responsibly, rather than teaching them to simply obey what other people say. Developing the students' discernment practices also helps students understand that church teachings continue to develop over time, and they are complex. Church teachings must be discerned and applied in particular circumstances. Such an understanding can liberate teachers from fearing they will lead students astray since moral decision-making of the person is not solely based on what teachers teach but also on the active discernment and conscientious decision-making of the person making the decision in context.

Respecting individual moral autonomy, as highlighted by Levand and Ross, is important in helping people discern their particular situations when it comes to reproductive health. In using their reason and will, people are exercising their freedom, hopefully following their conscience in making decisions for the good of themselves and others. Helping empower people to make decisions that are just and moral and helping people articulate their desires, concerns, and values, these are key in assisting them to discern and make good moral decisions. In exercising such moral autonomy, people also learn what it means to be accountable and to engage in responsible behavior, especially in the realm of sexual relations. However, respecting individual autonomy can be difficult in a more communitarian culture such as that in the Philippines, where most make decisions not just for themselves but in consideration of friends, family, or local community.

Given the Filipino context that is more collectivist, I would also propose highlighting the importance of the communal aspect of this discernment process along with one's moral autonomy. The communal discernment process is "a process undertaken by a community as a community for the purpose of judging what God is calling that community to do."³⁷ Especially

³⁷ Communal discernment in Ignatian spirituality highlights both the individual's decision-making, values, and concerns. See Jules J. Toner, "A Method for Communal Discernment of God's Will," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 3, no. 4 (1971): 124–125.

when conflicting ideas arise in a conflict-averse culture such as that in the Philippines, communal discernment gives a framework that communities can use to handle differing thoughts or help a person take seriously the concerns of others appropriately in moral decision-making, including in sexual ethics and reproductive health-related issues that can be highly contentious. Communal discernment gives a space for articulation, discussion, and deliberation of the discernment processes happening in a community, avoiding the assumption that all consciences will come to the same conclusion given the moral concerns and doctrines at work. Highlighting this communal aspect also resists the temptation of reducing discernment and moral decision-making to individualistic relativism that may be obscured by thinking that “God told me to do something,” while at the same time ensuring that the voice of the decision-maker does not get lost among the voices of everyone else.

The reproductive justice framework puts value on the agency of the person discerning. But more than just choosing what to do with one’s body, Christian discernment also emphasizes the process and the disposition of the decision-maker—what kind of person am I becoming? Thus, a CRHE that values the decision-making and discernment of a person is not only about the action to be done but also the inclination of the person towards the good. CRHE is formative, helping the person not just make good decisions regarding their reproductive health and its implications but also helping people understand what it means to be human. A Christian approach takes seriously the call to see sexual formation and decision-making in alignment with integral human development outlined in Catholic social thought.

Conclusion

CRHE is not against the teachings of the Catholic Church. This paper highlighted the need for age-appropriate understanding of reproductive health, sex, and sexual ethics. Catholic institutions should reject harmful

taboos and instead seek to contribute to a sex education rooted in holistic flourishing and moral development. Catholic schools have a role to play in helping people understand themselves as they grow, and this is not an attack on the person's moral innocence nor is it an encouragement to simply have sex with no sense of the implications therein. Rather, it is about supporting people so that they mature appropriately, with the right information that does not only discuss the physical dimension of reproductive health and sexuality but also the spiritual and ethical aspects of these complex issues. Thus, instead of seeking exemptions or not implementing this aspect of the RH Law in Catholic schools, this work seeks to start a conversation on how Catholic schools might implement CRHE in their own institutions, grounded in Catholic social thought, and towards integral human development.



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