

Nebulous Populism and the Constellation of Agencies within the Philippine Catholic Church

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Abstract: Many scholars who have studied populism consider it a nebulous concept, given the variety of causes that explain its formation. Some view it as emerging from failed liberal democracies with worsening economic inequalities. Others have viewed political disenfranchisement as a leading factor, while a handful relate it to socio-cultural and psychological yearnings for the kind of leader the populist leader embodies. This article explores how the emergence of Duterte’s brand of populism in the Philippines may be understood, considering its history of attempting to establish a liberal democracy. Given that the Philippines is a predominantly Catholic nation, the author also locates the Catholic Church, its hierarchy, and members as a conglomerate of various agents within the populist movement. Lastly, the author explores how populism in the Philippines challenges the church’s desire to be a church for and of the poor.

SCHOLARS WHO HAVE STUDIED POPULISM HAVE REVEALED that while it has a thin political ideology, several characteristics can help define and identify whether a government or movement is becoming populist. Some view it as emerging from failed liberal democracies with worsening economic inequalities. Others have viewed political disenfranchisement as a leading factor, while a handful relate it to socio-cultural and psychological yearnings for the kind of leader the populist leader embodies.¹ Other scholars relate it to the rise of social media and the absence of traditional gatekeeping agents in exchanging information on the Internet.² International Affairs expert Cas Mudde observed that

[Populism] is growing in developing democracies in other parts of the world, most notably in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa. . . . Given the even larger economic, social, and

¹ See Noam Gidron and Bart Bonikowski, “Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY, 2013), doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2459387.

² Agnes M. Brazal, *A Theology of Southeast Asia: Liberation-Postcolonial Ethics in the Philippines*, Duffy Lectures in Global Christianity (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019).

political diversity of these regions, it is harder to distinguish clear trends, although certain shared characteristics of populist actors can be determined.³

Given these factors, it is helpful to hold all these together and identify which factor has greater weight or influence in understanding the emergence of populism in particular contexts. In this article, I will explore how populism has emerged in the Philippines, making it possible for Rodrigo Duterte to be the preferred leader.

Then, using a typology of populist agents presented by James Keenan, I will explore the agency of the masses, the leader, and the opposition within the Catholic Church in the Philippines. Lastly, I will unpack how populism presents challenges and invitations to the Catholic Church's self-understanding and mission in the Philippines by considering the works of Fr. Flavie Villanueva and the role of the mission stations in the Diocese of Kalookan led by Bishop Pablo Virgilio "Ambo" David. I argue that understanding populism as emerging from the antagonistic relationship between two groups, especially in the Philippines, calls the elites within the Filipino Catholic Church to grow in recognition of the disenfranchised masses within their own nation and church community.

UNPACKING DUTERTE'S POPULISM: FRUSTRATIONS, ANXIETIES, AND HOPES OF THE FILIPINO

Despite the fact that "populism is a nebulous concept," sociologists Adele Webb and Nicole Curato assert that Rodrigo Duterte is a populist. Duterte manifests core characteristics from varying studies on populism. Without conflating nationalism and populism, Webb and Curato recognize that the Philippines is characterized by a populist nationalism they describe in this manner:

Rather than tapping into issues of ethno-cultural identity, this type of populism mobilizes incendiary ideas of power, status, and hierarchy and takes the form of demands for national self-determination and struggles for national autonomy. The populist down/up antagonism (rather than in/out) structures political demands. The nation in its entirety becomes the underdog (down), pitted against an "elite" (up) who may be national or international and who are deemed illegitimate for being opposed to the nation's interests.⁴

³ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 38.

⁴ Adele Webb and Nicole Curato, "Populism in the Philippines," in *Populism Around the World* (Cham: Springer International, 2018), 50–52, doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-96758-5_4.

This definition of populist nationalism provides a succinct description of the populism Duterte wields. He used “power, status, and hierarchy” to launch his political agenda as one who would fight the elites on behalf of his underdog supporters and meet their demands. One antagonism Duterte surfaces is resentment from the glaring socioeconomic inequality in the Philippines due to the neglect by longstanding political elites.

Ronald Mendoza and Leonardo Jaminola observed that various causes explain the growing Filipino preference for populist leaders. One factor is the inability of previous and incumbent political players to narrow the inequality gap in the Philippines, despite the constant economic growth the country has enjoyed in recent decades. The inequality gap is more pronounced in urban areas, where one sees the development of gated subdivisions and the rise of luxury condominiums beside swaths of increasingly congested urban settlements. Such “in-your-face inequality” has generated growing pressure for a pushback. They also noted that the “growing concerns over the challenges and risks associated with rapid urbanization—including the threat of crime and illegal drugs, rising transport costs and traffic, as well as economic uncertainty” are contributing factors favoring the populist Duterte.⁵

In another work, Nicole Curato observed that Duterte presents a dichotomy “between virtuous citizens versus hardened criminals”⁶ involved in the illegal drug trade. By declaring during his campaign that there is a crisis caused by the pervasive problem of illegal drugs throughout the country, Duterte managed to tap into a “latent anxiety already existing in the public sphere.”⁷ In recent years, some communities have noted how the spread and use of illegal drugs has become a more noticeable and disturbing problem. Curato noticed how community leaders she interviewed felt that “they have been left to deal with this issue by themselves.”⁸ She notes from her field observations that the problem of illegal drugs has always been there. Communities bear the negative consequences of disrupted social relations caused by users and peddlers of illegal drugs. Yet, only Duterte brought this issue to the fore of national politics by making it a concern for the whole country. In doing so, he earned the image of someone who cared about the problems of people on the ground, and

⁵ Ronald U. Mendoza and Leonardo M. Jaminola, “Is Duterte a Populist? Rhetoric vs. Reality,” *CIRSD, Horizons: The Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development* 15 (Winter 2020): 267–268.

⁶ Nicole Curato, “Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope: Penal Populism and Duterte’s Rise to Power,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35, no. 3 (December 1, 2016): 94, doi.org/10.1177/186810341603500305.

⁷ Curato, “Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope,” 98.

⁸ Curato, “Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope,” 99.

promised he was willing to solve the problem by every means possible if and when he was elected president.

By surfacing this problem, Duterte implied that some people in government have turned a blind eye and should be held accountable. He tapped into the frustration and resentment felt by people whose concern about illegal drug use had gone unrecognized by previous administrations. In Duterte, Curato observed that “citizens who often find themselves hassled by petty thieves and addicts envision a sense of finality . . . even if it happens at the expense of due process. After all, what use is due process if it entails taking part in the slow and inefficient process of the criminal justice system?”⁹ In her work with Webb, Curato notes how these manifested the failure of the liberal democracy project in the Philippines. Thus, in supporting Duterte and rejecting the groups advocating for liberal democracy, Duterte’s supporters agree with his understanding of the crisis besieging the Philippines.¹⁰

The frustration and resentment that surfaced were not just directed toward an unresponsive government; it was also aimed at the political values and principles—human rights, due process, and so forth—that abated the pace of justice for citizens seeking a solution to the drug problem. Curato explains this by presenting Frederic Schaeffer’s idea politics.” “Privileged segments of society consider transparent and accountable governance as central to democratic practice, impoverished regarding how different socio-economic classes define “good communities view consideration and kindness as constitutive of ‘good politics.’”¹¹ She asserts that this applies to Duterte’s supporters, especially seeing that the latter have rejected the language and values used by the previous administration, which privileged decency over vulgarity, the clean over the corrupt, and rights over lives, especially since those values did not seem to motivate then incumbent officials in solving their woes. In her study with Webb, they observed that

Duterte framed his attack by building on the antagonism between, on one hand, weak liberal institutions, the oligarchs that benefit from the system, and liberal signifiers such as human rights and, on the other hand, the interests of the nation and the popular sovereignty of the “people.”¹²

In laying this bare, Duterte exposed the flaws of the system and identified antagonists to the people’s progress. In cementing the mistrust people had with systems, processes, rule of law, human rights,

⁹ Curato, “Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope,” 100–101.

¹⁰ Webb and Curato, “Populism in the Philippines,” 60.

¹¹ Curato, “Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope,” 96–97.

¹² Webb and Curato, “Populism in the Philippines,” 60.

and incumbent politicians, he galvanized his image of an outsider to national politics willing to lead a government that “delivers because not despite of cutting corners.”¹³ Thus, those who would later criticize Duterte for his refusal to observe the rule of law and uphold human rights, especially during his anti-drug campaign, would be labeled “enemies of the people.”

The frustration and resentment Duterte taps into have long been present, especially among the masses. One of the key arguments in Richard Heydarian’s account of Duterte’s ascension to the presidency is the “simmering public dissatisfaction with the post-Marcos ‘elite democracy,’ which failed to live up to its initial promise of social justice and sustainable development.”¹⁴ It is ironic that Duterte’s election happened exactly three decades after Marcos, Sr.’s ouster during the EDSA Revolution, and that his presidency is sandwiched between Benigno Aquino III’s and Ferdinand Marcos, Jr.’s. The former is the son of Corazon Aquino, whom the Filipinos elected as president to replace the dictator Marcos, Sr., who happens to be the latter’s father.

Throughout the presidency of Duterte’s predecessor Benigno Aquino III, the Philippines enjoyed an average GDP growth rate of 6.2% while significantly reducing unemployment and underemployment. When he finished his term, the World Bank changed their moniker for the Philippines from the “sick man of East Asia” to “the rising tiger,”¹⁵ yet the masses barely felt this change. This just widened the existing income gap. “The rich had tripled their incomes from P630 billion in 2010 to P2.2 trillion in 2015—a 250 percent increase—as they consolidated or expanded their control of the banking, telecommunications, and property development sectors.”¹⁶ By 2016, fourteen Filipinos managed to land on the Billionaires List of *Forbes* but when Aquino started his presidency in 2010, there were only three Filipinos on the list. While this exclusive group of billionaires accounted for 11.3% of the country’s GDP in 2016, the contribution of the bottom 20% did not reach 5%.¹⁷

While the previous argument focuses on economic disenfranchisement, Abinales and Amoroso mention other factors as well.¹⁸ Thus, the failure of the liberal democracy project to deliver reform and

¹³ Webb and Curato, “Populism in the Philippines,” 61.

¹⁴ Richard Javad Heydarian, *The Rise of Duterte* (New York: Springer, 2017), 11.

¹⁵ Patricio N. Abinales and Donna J. Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 321.

¹⁶ Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, 323.

¹⁷ Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, 321–323.

¹⁸ Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, 337. For a more in-depth historical treatment, one may consult their chapter analyzing the first year of Duterte’s presidency.

prosperity after the ouster of the dictator Marcos thirty years ago can also be understood in other forms of marginalization. The issue is not just about trickling down economic gains, but also addressing the frustrations and insecurities of the middle class and Filipinos' ambivalent attitude toward liberal democracy's power to improve their daily realities.¹⁹

LOCATING THE CHURCH WITHIN PHILIPPINE POPULISM

How does this understanding of populism help us identify and characterize various agents of populism as located within the Philippine church? Sociological and documentary resources illuminate this question. Journalist Adam Willis claims that

in the Philippines, the church has emerged as the most prominent voice of dissent against a drug war that has claimed, by some estimates, more than twenty thousand lives. It is also under perpetual assault from a president intent on contesting the very essence of Philippine Catholicism. Having framed his 2015 campaign as a referendum on the legitimacy of the church, Duterte has forced religious leaders to choose between coveted political capital and their moral mandates.²⁰

While this statement may be true in some sense, as unpacked below, it betrays a monolithic understanding of the Catholic Church in the Philippines. To look at how the Catholic Church is embroiled in this drug war and the broader phenomenon of Duterte's populism requires a deeper analysis than what Willis presents. Given the diversity of actors and views within the Catholic Church, I will use James Keenan's enumeration of the agents of populism to identify the varied ways members of the Catholic Church acts as agents of populism. Keenan identifies five groups of agents within the populist movement. These are:

The masses themselves, their leaders, the wealthy who fund the leaders, other institutional opportunists who capitalize on the inroads made by the populist movement, and finally the so-called elite: the government's lawmakers who have the opportunity to respond but do not yet recognize the validity of those populists' claims regarding their

¹⁹ Webb and Curato, "Populism in the Philippines," 60.

²⁰ Adam Willis and Eloisa Lopez, "Church vs. State: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's Brutal but Popular War on Drugs Has Forced the Catholic Church to Ask Itself a Defining Question: What Is Its Responsibility under an Immoral Regime?," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 95, no. 2 (June 17, 2019): 42.

own non-recognition and resulting inequities and subsequent alienation.²¹

In the subsequent sections, I will explore, per Keenan's description, how church members are found among the populist masses and also in the elites. It will be helpful to add how members of the church are considered agents opposed to the populist regime without necessarily lumping them automatically with the rest of the elites.

The Church among Populist Masses

Considering that the Philippines is a predominantly Christian and Catholic country, one can locate the church among the supporters of Duterte. Jayeel Cornelio, a sociologist of religion, and Erron Medina, a graduate researcher from the University of the Philippines, have pointed out that some Christians support Duterte because they agree that the problem of illegal drugs is a scourge to the Philippines. Some of the supporters Cornelio and Medina interviewed would even go as far as saying that Duterte's presidency was a godsend.²² While Cornelio and Medina's study primarily focused on Protestant communities, another study by Cornelio notes that there are also members and leaders of the Catholic Church in the Philippines who support Duterte.²³

Per Cornelio and Medina's interviews, those who support the drug war do so because they believe that "a strong and decisive" campaign is necessary since, given their circumstances, "a direct relationship exists between substance abuse and criminality."²⁴ They consider drug users and peddlers to be people who deliberately engage in sinful actions. Thus, "God gave us [this] government . . . to protect the innocent and punish the guilty. They have swords and guns for a reason."²⁵ I will return to this perspective on drug users and pushers below.

In a previous study, Webb and Curato noted:

²¹ James F. Keenan, "Restoring Social Trust: From Populism to Synodality," *Theological Studies* 84, no. 1 (March 1, 2023): 199.

²² Jayeel Serrano Cornelio and Erron Medina, "Christianity and Duterte's War on Drugs in the Philippines," *Politics, Religion, & Ideology* 20, no. 2 (June 2019): 159, doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2019.1617135.

²³ Jayeel Cornelio and Gideon Lasco, "Morality Politics: Drug Use and the Catholic Church in the Philippines," *Open Theology* 6, no. 1 (2020): 327. See Paterno Esmaguél, "Why Filipinos Believe Duterte Was 'Appointed by God,'" News, *Rappler*, June 28, 2019, www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/234115-why-filipinos-believe-duterte-appointed-by-god/.

²⁴ Cornelio and Medina, "Christianity and Duterte's War on Drugs."

²⁵ Cornelio and Medina, "Christianity and Duterte's War on Drugs," 160.

We offered ethnographic evidence that demonstrates how “virtuous citizens” who claim to have done everything to earn a decent living feel disdain for “addicts on street corners”—“the dangerous other.” The anxiety deepens when Filipinos who invested time and resources to “virtuous projects,” like volunteering in local livelihood programs or the church, feel that the future of their children is put in jeopardy if they make friends or enemies with these addicts. For the longest time, these anxieties were latent. . . . The enemy in this narrative is within the nation—the dangerous drug pushers, as well as the greedy and tone-deaf elites of Imperial Manila, including the corrupt justice system and those who turn a blind eye to the drug scourge.²⁶

Given these, Duterte supporters feel justified in their support for his anti-drug war, especially since he is the only president who managed to make the problem of illegal drugs a national issue. This became more evident in performance satisfaction surveys, where Duterte continued to enjoy record-high trust and satisfaction ratings despite the reports of thousands of casualties in the anti-drug war. Most of the respondents in these surveys were aware of the killings taking place under his administration.²⁷ Cornelio and Medina observed that “the argument is that people feel safer now, which is why they remain supportive of the War on Drugs. For many people, according to another study, the killings are acceptable because ‘these are the people that made our miserable lives even more miserable.’”²⁸ It must be noted that the satisfaction and preference for Duterte goes beyond support for his anti-drug campaign. It also signals a deep-seated frustration and resentment against the government and other civil society groups advocating for liberal democratic ideals Filipinos fought for during the past three decades.

The Church among Elites

When the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines synthesized the diocesan synodal reports in preparation for the first meeting of the Synod on Synodality held in October 2023, they published the national synodal report, which articulates the various sentiments of the clergy, religious, and laypeople shared during the nationwide local and diocesan synodal conversations. Given the high response and participation rate noted in the national synodal report, it would be safe to assume that what the report contains approximates the current state of the Philippine Catholic Church. The earlier sections of the document presented the people’s perceptions and observations about the clergy. The report notes:

²⁶ Webb and Curato, “Populism in the Philippines,” 59.

²⁷ Cornelio and Medina, “Christianity and Duterte’s War on Drugs,” 168.

²⁸ Cornelio and Medina, “Christianity and Duterte’s War on Drugs.”

Many of the underprivileged and those who were marginalized in society felt that they were also left out in the church. As the church is seen to be for the rich, the economically poor as well as those who are deprived of social acceptance are being left out. Dioceses with Catholics as minorities felt however, that they can identify more closely with those who were marginalized and persecuted, and for this reason they embodied a church of the poor and those suffering from bombings, intimidations, and persecutions. . . . When the poor speak out or try to voice an opinion, they are simply ignored or set aside as unimportant. Many people feel that only the donors and benefactors (dubbed as the “owners of the church”) have a voice or are entitled to speak out.²⁹

In his analysis, Keenan locates religious, cultural, and social leaders as a fourth group of agents who “use the populist leader and the populist masses for their own gain.”³⁰ Keenan’s description of religious and cultural leaders applies more to other sects like the *Iglesia ni Kristo* or the community of Apollo Quiboloy, rather than the Catholic Church.³¹ Given Duterte’s tirades and the state of the Catholic Church in the Philippines, some members of the Catholic community, especially the hierarchy, can be identified with the elites in the way Keenan described them as agents. He writes that the elites

are in part responsible for the original non-recognition of what later emerged as a populist movement. In this they are similar to the masses they ignore: they each consider themselves victims and acquit themselves of any moral wrongdoing. The elite have overlooked many in their maintenance of liberal democracies and kept them in place in the elite’s evident hierarchies. But often their agency, their “causative” role in the development of the populist claims, goes unacknowledged.³²

As seen with how the populist masses in the Philippines have been disenfranchised, the elites within the Catholic Church may, unknowingly, have contributed to this disenfranchisement, given how they have been associated with the oligarchs and their treatment of the poor and marginalized. Furthermore, some sectors in civil society “expressed their concrete needs and grievances and challenged the

²⁹ “Salubong—The Philippine Catholic Church Synodal Report—SYNOD 2021–2023 Philippines,” Synod 21–24 Philippines, August 19, 2022, synodphilippines.com/salubong-the-philippine-catholic-church-synodal-report/.

³⁰ Keenan, “Restoring Social Trust,” 122.

³¹ It may be a different matter, though, for other Christian denominations and independent churches. Keenan’s conception of the role of religious leaders is helpful in understanding the role leaders of Megachurches play as they support Duterte’s War on Drugs. See Jayeel Cornelio and Ia Marañon, “A ‘Righteous Intervention’: Megachurch Christianity and Duterte’s War on Drugs in the Philippines,” *International Journal of Asian Christianity* 2, no. 2 (October 2019): 211–230, doi.org/10.1163/25424246-00202005.

³² Keenan, “Restoring Social Trust,” 124.

church to fight with them and for them,” given that there is an expectation that it is part of the church’s mission. Some indigenous peoples even expressed how they “see themselves as ‘objects of missionary help,’ but they are neglected in the area of evangelization.”³³ Why is this so? How come the leaders or elites of the local church are unable to recognize the plight of the poor within the church and act accordingly?

Filipino moral theologian Rolando Tuazon provides possible answers. First, he observes that the Catholic Church in the Philippines is preoccupied with internal institutional matters rather than living out a preferential option for the poor and marginalized. Given the Philippine context, Tuazon sees what Pope Francis noted, that “in some people, we see an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine, and for the church’s prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel has a real impact on God’s faithful people and the concrete needs of the present time.”³⁴ As if affirming what respondents have shared during the synodal consultations, Tuazon goes on to point out how the local church lacks a united front in being in solidarity with the poor facing problems such as “agrarian reform, demolition of informal settlements, contractualization of labor, minimum wage, union organization, and strikes.”³⁵ Such an assessment challenges the Philippine church with what the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines articulated as its mission to become a church of the poor and for the poor.³⁶

The second reason Tuazon points out is that church communities and organizations tend to undermine the voice and agency of the poor and marginalized in their programs and in articulating their vision for a just society. They are often viewed as mere recipients of these programs or outreach communities by church communities. He notes that his respondents often perceive “people in the Church . . . to be the ones who teach, direct, and guide.”³⁷ Such an answer already signals how the poor and marginalized do not see themselves as part of those who are in the church.

Tuazon’s third reason complements his second. If the poor and marginalized do not see themselves as part of the church, then one is

³³ “Salubong—The Philippine Catholic Church Synodal Report.”

³⁴ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 95 in Rolando A. Tuazon, “Social Discernment from the Margins: A Reappropriation of CST in Light of the Philippines’ 2022 Elections,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 20, no. 1 (March 20, 2023): 58, doi.org/10.5840/jcathsoc20232014.

³⁵ Tuazon, “Social Discernment from the Margins,” 59.

³⁶ Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Manila: Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, 1992), nos. 125–127.

³⁷ Tuazon, “Social Discernment from the Margins,” 59.

forced to ask: who forms the church? Tuazon asserts that the church is identified more with the middle and upper classes. He even emphasizes how the middle class is seen as mission partners, and those in the lower socioeconomic classes are considered recipients or beneficiaries of the church's mission work.³⁸

Another reason Tuazon provides is the preoccupation the church has with "personal morality and sexual ethics." This often obviates people from seeing how the ethical tradition of the Catholic Church can contribute to societal transformation. When considering the broader Catholic population in the Philippines, Catholic social teaching or CST is considered "the best-kept secret of the church." For him, this tradition has not yet been integrated well into the Filipino Catholic faith³⁹ on account of a merely conceptual understanding of "solidarity and a preferential option for the poor." Thus, he sees this as a failure of church leaders to help Christians understand and appreciate the social mission of the church deeply tied to the call to engage in integral evangelization. More than just having to produce and disseminate knowledge of CST, the call is to more authentic witnessing.⁴⁰ At the heart of it is the incapacity to be moved and recognize the scandalous poverty and destitution experienced by the poor.

The reasons provided by Tuazon make sense when considering the National Synodal Report released by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, explored earlier. When asked how people see themselves *vis-à-vis* the Catholic Church, a variety of responses came from those who participated in the synodal consultations; some were surprised to find out that church leaders were interested in listening to their concerns. In other cases, respondents identified the inability of the church to journey with them considering the ministerial practice of clergy. In this case, some pointed out how their pastors are barely immersed in their communities and caught up with vices. Underprivileged groups felt they were being "left out in the church." Interestingly, dioceses in regions where the Catholics are a minority population are more identified with the poor and marginalized rather than the affluent and elites in the area. Then, there are "those who were demoralized or felt excluded" who "have left the church and no longer find the need to be part of it," as a result of clerical sexual abuse, priests who eventually have children, or the indifference they feel towards the "pastoral statements and programs of the church."⁴¹

³⁸ Tuazon, "Social Discernment from the Margins," 61.

³⁹ Tuazon, "Social Discernment from the Margins," 62.

⁴⁰ Tuazon, "Social Discernment from the Margins," 63–64.

⁴¹ "Salubong—The Philippine Catholic Church Synodal Report," 3–4.

At this point, we have seen how the local church in the Philippines, its leaders, and some of its members are associated with the elites and how this association makes them an alienated and antagonized group within Duterte's populist regime.

The Church within the Opposition

While we have seen how some members and leaders of the Catholic Church in the Philippines count among the elites who may have been oblivious to the lives and woes of the poor, that is not the case for the entire Catholic Church. If we could locate both masses and elites within the same ecclesial community, those who resist and oppose Duterte's populism could also be found within the same church. Locating the Catholic Church within the opposition and understanding their agency is also important since we risk undermining their efforts at resistance by simply lumping them together with the groups of agents identified by Keenan.

In the last chapter of their book, *State and Society in the Philippines*, Abinales and Amoroso give us a glimpse of the first year of Duterte's administration. They wrote:

Once elected, Duterte gave the Philippine National Police (PNP) *carte blanche* to go after and kill drug lords, pushers, and addicts. He vowed to kill a million addicts if need be, in the same way that Adolf Hitler killed millions of Jews. . . . Duterte promised the police that he would protect them even from legal action, and police doubled their campaign. The extra-judicial killings proceeded in earnest, and by December 14, 2016, six months after Duterte was sworn in as president, 6,095 suspected drug addicts and pushers had already been killed by police special assassination teams and vigilantes.⁴²

Cornelio and Medina point out that certain leaders and members of the Catholic Church started speaking up against Duterte, his bloody campaign against illegal drugs, and other contentious aspects of his presidency and remained undeterred despite Duterte issuing death threats and calling out Catholics, especially their leaders, for their hypocrisy.⁴³ Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical leaders alike have pointed out that these extra-judicial killings have only been concentrated in poor communities while letting the wealthy drug lords run with impunity. The entire drug war was built on a blatant disregard for human rights and the rule of law, without any resolve to root out

⁴² Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, 340–341.

⁴³ Cornelio and Medina, "Christianity and Duterte's War on Drugs," 152.

the problem.⁴⁴ Despite these pronouncements, the church's voice of opposition is hardly a united front. However, it continues to grow as members of the church continually reflect on the call to respond to the challenge surfaced by Duterte's populism and his campaign against illegal drugs.

Given the Philippine church's involvement in the ouster of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos, Sr., various groups, within and outside the Catholic Church, expect the hierarchy to be as outspoken as during the Marcos dictatorship. Some groups described the church's response during Duterte's presidency as lukewarm and tentative or, in some cases, absent.⁴⁵ Despite the perceived silence of some members of the church hierarchy, several priests like Frs. Robert Reyes, Flavie Villanueva, SVD, and Albert Alejo, SJ, have become vocal critics of Duterte's bloody anti-drug war. At the same time, other groups and individuals supported resistance movements by providing sanctuary to whistleblowers and potential witnesses against the drug war.⁴⁶ In fact, the Duterte administration filed charges of "conspiracy to commit sedition" against Alejo and Villanueva, together with other key personalities of the opposition, but these were eventually dropped.⁴⁷

Members and leaders of the Catholic Church who oppose Duterte do so either because of Duterte's campaign against illegal drugs or the challenge his brand of populism brings. Filipino theologian Jose Mario Francisco identifies how Duterte's populism has challenged the church and her evangelizing mission. Francisco is troubled with how Filipino Catholics and Christians show overwhelming support for Duterte's anti-drug campaign despite how it has systematically undermined due process, neglected human rights, and only targeted poor communities. He also mentions how the Catholic Church should reexamine its social mission, which entails working beyond the election season. It cannot be content having to "enjoin citizens in voting wisely, resisting patronage politics, and supporting [election] monitoring organizations."⁴⁸ Lastly, Francisco points out the need to challenge what he perceives to be a Manichean perspective implicit in Duterte's view of drug users and the drug problem in the Philippines.⁴⁹ At the heart of the last challenge posited by Francisco is an invitation

⁴⁴ Mario Francisco, SJ, "Challenges of Dutertismo to Philippine Christianity," *International Journal of Asian Christianity* 4 (2021): 153, doi.org/10.1163/25424246-04010008.

⁴⁵ Willis and Lopez, "Church vs. State," 47.

⁴⁶ Willis and Lopez, "Church vs. State," 52.

⁴⁷ Lian Buan, "Priests Plead Not Guilty to Sedition in 'Oust Duterte' Plot Charge," *Rappler*, October 20, 2020, www.rappler.com/nation/priests-plea-conspiracy-sedition-duterte-ouster-plot-charge/.

⁴⁸ Francisco, "Challenges of Dutertismo to Philippine Christianity," 153.

⁴⁹ Francisco, "Challenges of Dutertismo to Philippine Christianity," 151.

for the church to grow in deeper recognition not just of those marginalized by Duterte's populism and anti-drug war but also those who have long been disenfranchised in Philippine society—the populist masses themselves.

THE CALL TO GROW IN RECOGNITION

In *The Moral Life*, his most recent book, Keenan outlines various stages to the moral life. The third of these foundational stages is recognition. Using Paddy McQueen's exposition on the unfolding of recognition, Keenan proposes that "the move from recognizing someone as familiar to giving recognition to one to whom it is due is, I think, the threshold into the moral life." This unfolding of recognition allows one to identify and acknowledge another person as a fellow human being, triggering our ethical responsiveness.⁵⁰ Overcoming populism requires that the various agents, as we have outlined above, grow in mutual recognition. Keenan suggests that the elites need to engage and recognize the populist masses.⁵¹ Likewise, I would further suggest that populist masses are also called to acknowledge and recognize the humanity of the groups the populist leader touts as a threat to the masses' identity and security—the elites, drug users, and peddlers. In this way, the agency of the masses as populist supporters is not undermined.

First, we shall look into the importance of recognizing the humanity of the usual victims of Duterte's bloody drug war—the victims of extra-judicial killings, especially among the poor. Then, we shall consider how the church is called to greater vulnerability and recognition of those who have long experienced economic and political disenfranchisement within its own ranks.

A Church for Duterte's Scapegoats

When Cornelio and Medina studied how Christian communities responded to Duterte's anti-drug campaign, they noticed that the way communities responded was related to how they viewed the drug problem and drug users. Based on their study, religious communities would view them as "either sinful human beings or victims of wider social injustices such as poverty." These responses, however, are not necessarily mutually exclusive absolute categories.⁵²

⁵⁰ James F. Keenan, *The Moral Life* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2023), 41.

⁵¹ Keenan, "Restoring Social Trust," 125.

⁵² Cornelio and Medina, "Christianity and Duterte's War on Drugs," 154.

Some Christian and Catholic communities condemn the anti-drug campaign because it violates one of the commandments. Aside from this religious reason, others offer a nuanced view of the illegal drug problem that goes beyond treating it as a discipline and security concern. Several Catholic priests and their parish communities, especially in Payatas in Quezon City, a known hotspot for the anti-drug campaign, know that substance abuse is an issue of poverty and health rather than a mere criminal problem. This view is a far cry from seeing drug users only as obstinate sinners who need to be eradicated.⁵³ These differences in views, albeit positive, also inform the variety of responses. Some of these Christian communities help drug users and sellers by praying for their conversion, especially since they are convinced this is the only way a church should respond. Other church communities provide a comprehensive repertoire of interventions ranging from recollections and values formation programs to livelihood support, counseling, and legal assistance.⁵⁴

One interesting result of Cornelio and Medina's study is that the Christian communities providing these comprehensive responses are motivated to do so not just because they have the resources but because of their immersion and engagement with these communities. Some of the priests and pastors of these churches live in areas known to be drug and extra-judicial killing hotspots. Cornelio and Medina point out that direct encounter with the "affected families has affirmed their theological understanding of drug users as victims of wider social injustices. The War on Drugs adds to the layers of injustices drug users already experience."⁵⁵ This response among Catholics and Christians reflects how the recognition of marginalized groups, especially of the scapegoats Duterte uses in his populist propaganda, leads to the ethical responsiveness of one collective to the plight of another. By being immersed and present to these communities, these leaders and the members of their congregations are, as Keenan writes, "vulnerably disposed to the other" which leads to their recognition of the drug war victims and eventually their discerned moral response in conscience.⁵⁶

One of the vocal critics of Duterte's administration is Fr. Flavie Villanueva, SVD. Together with Fr. Albert Alejo, SJ, he was charged with conspiracy to commit sedition against the Duterte administration. However, he is also well-known for establishing the Arnold Janssen Kalinga Center in Tayuman, Manila, one of the hotspots of the drug campaign. The Kalinga Center caters to homeless people within the area, even those involved in the use and selling of drugs. Kalinga is an

⁵³ Cornelio and Medina, "Christianity and Duterte's War on Drugs," 159–160.

⁵⁴ Cornelio and Medina, "Christianity and Duterte's War on Drugs," 162–164.

⁵⁵ Cornelio and Medina, "Christianity and Duterte's War on Drugs," 166.

⁵⁶ Keenan, *The Moral Life*, 22.

acronym for *Kain, Ligo, Nang Ayos*, which means “to eat and take a bath with dignity.”⁵⁷

What is compelling about Fr. Flavie’s story is that he himself used to be a drug addict before entering the seminary of the Society of Divine Word.⁵⁸ Their beneficiaries have witnessed the vigilante-style killings around their area, but they, together with the staff and benefactors of the Kalinga center, are convinced that the drug problem cannot be solved by killing the users and pushers. The homeless and Flavie himself are vulnerably disposed to recognizing these victims and the families they have left behind. They recognize that these people ended up as drug users partly due to the helplessness of having to deal with extreme poverty. However, some of the victims ended up as targets simply because they were poor and homeless, even if they had nothing to do with drugs. Thus, the Kalinga center caters to them as well and offers psychological support to those traumatized by the killings and other harassment brought about by Duterte’s anti-drug campaign.⁵⁹

A Church for Populist Masses

Lindsey Horner points out how there is a strong temptation to think of populist supporters as an uneducated mob and that the “liberal elite” are the educated ones. Even when evidence already points to the high support Duterte enjoyed from the middle and educated classes in Philippine society, most administration critics, including the vocal ones within the church, still stick with this narrative. Perpetuating this thinking cements any divide between the populist supporters and elites.⁶⁰ This temptation is often reinforced when one fails to recognize conflicting values and understanding of politics. Such conflicts can invite encounters and dialogue where mutual recognition, respect, and listening can be exercised.

In accounting for the unwavering support Duterte enjoyed, Curato reminds us that this comes from the vast majority of Filipinos excluded from the benefits of the country’s economic gains over the past years. Thus, critics of Duterte should disabuse themselves of the notion that his supporters are morally compromised diehard fanatics who “call for killing sprees, scream bias at journalists, threaten rape

⁵⁷ “About Us—AJ Kalinga Foundation Inc,” *Ajkalingafoundation.Org* (blog), accessed December 6, 2023, www.ajkalingafoundation.org/about-us/.

⁵⁸ Aika Rey, “From Drug Addiction to Priesthood,” *Rappler*, accessed December 6, 2023, www.rappler.com/moveph/196880-drug-addiction-priesthood-faith-flavie-villanueva/.

⁵⁹ Rey, “From Drug Addiction to Priesthood.”

⁶⁰ Lindsey K. Horner, “Oscillating between Populism and Liberalism in the Philippines: Participatory Education’s Role in Addressing Stubborn Inequalities,” *Globalisation, Societies, and Education* 22, no. 2 (2022), 3–4, doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2022.2048799.

and murder.”⁶¹ Amidst all these explanations, Curato offers another way of appreciating Duterte’s supporters as people engaged in “constant negotiation between the politics of anxiety and the politics of hope.”⁶² That is why their understanding of good politics, as seen earlier, is defined more in terms of consideration and kindness rather than an elite understanding marked by transparency and accountability. Understanding these nuances does not come easily to most people unless there is a recognition of their hopes and frustrations brought about by encounters with them that makes elites, including church leaders, vulnerable, as Keenan would frame it.⁶³

In presenting these, I am not suggesting that the church abandon its criticisms or prophetic role. As a matter of fact, in considering everything I have written thus far, I sense that the church, as a whole, is invited to deepen its commitment to mission, which Tuazon and Francisco also point out. If the Philippine church still believes it is called to be a church of the poor and for the poor, it needs to heed the call to greater vulnerability and recognition. Bishop Pablo Virgilio “Ambo” David, Bishop of the Diocese of Kalookan and President of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), can be seen as an exemplar in this regard. Ambo is one of those bishops who, Tony La Viña notes, “is not content to ensconce himself in the bishop’s residence overseeing his diocese by way of remote control but is willing to sully his hands attending to the needs of his flock. . . . That is why he has made Kalookan a place of mission stations, bringing the church from the traditional parishes into the neighborhoods of the poor where most of the killings are happening.”⁶⁴

Mission stations, which started sprouting in Bishop Ambo’s diocese, eventually became the fruit of the church’s recognition of people marginalized both by society and the church. Rented houses in the middle of urban poor communities would become the residence of missionary priests or sisters. They would also serve as bases of operations for drug rehabilitation programs conducted in partnership with the local government and other civil society organizations.⁶⁵ As more and more priests and religious sisters lived in the same poor communities as their lay leaders and congregation, they would see and experience poverty and the problem of illegal drugs firsthand. Mission station chaplains noticed they began to understand better the poor and

⁶¹ Curato, “Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope,” 92.

⁶² Curato, “Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope,” 92.

⁶³ Keenan, *The Moral Life*, 24.

⁶⁴ Antonio La Viña, “[OPINION] Pablo Virgilio David: The Shepherd of Caloocan,” *Rappler*, November 30, 2018, www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/217859-bishop-pablo-virgilio-david-shepherd-caloocan/.

⁶⁵ “The Bishop Rehabilitating Caloocan,” *ABS-CBN News*, accessed December 7, 2023, news.abs-cbn.com/ancx/culture/spotlight/11/23/18/the-bishop-rehabilitating-caloocan.

marginalized in their communities, and such “knowledge” would not just be attainable by quick sporadic visits. On the other hand, their presence has helped decrease incidents of violent encounters between gangs.⁶⁶

These mission stations provide an immersive view of how relationships can be transformed by growing in vulnerability and recognition. In such a set-up, one can see the various agents mentioned earlier who can be found within the church—the elites, populist masses, and populists’ scapegoats. In these neighborhoods, encounters can transform any anger, frustration, and resentment these agents may have with one another into a fruitful coexistence that, hopefully, goes beyond mere tolerance.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have explored how populism is broadly understood as a nebulous concept, given the various causes that differ depending on the context. Yet one important characteristic is the antagonism amplified by the populist leader between two or more groups of citizens to garner popular support. In the case of the Philippines, the government’s perceived inability to take decisive action in solving the problem of illegal drugs and the long history of disenfranchisement felt by the majority of Filipinos made the choice for an authoritarian populist like Duterte possible. Understanding the various agents embroiled in Duterte’s populist regime also allowed us to understand the diversity of agencies within the Philippine church.

Despite how populism thrives with the fealty between supporters and the leader and the antagonistic relationship the masses have with elites and the populists’ scapegoats, this cannot be the case for the Philippine church. Populism can be viewed as a challenge to the church’s mission of recognizing and identifying itself with the poor and marginalized in society and even within its ranks. Otherwise, the history of disenfranchisement will continue even long after Duterte’s presidency.

At the time of writing this article, Duterte no longer is president of the Philippines. Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., the late dictator’s son, is the current president while Duterte’s daughter, Sara Duterte, serves as vice-president. While the Marcos and Duterte camps are already planning for the subsequent election cycles, the government’s drug war continues and seems to be just as bloody as during Duterte’s time, despite Marcos’s promise to pursue the campaign against illegal drugs

⁶⁶ Paul Jeffrey, “Taking the Church to the Peripheries: Mission Stations in Philippines | Franciscan Media,” November 15, 2022, www.franciscanmedia.org/news-commentary/taking-the-church-to-the-peripheries-mission-stations-in-philippines/.

humanely.⁶⁷ Legislative hearings are being held to investigate Duterte's bloody drug war while the Philippine government still refuses to cooperate with the International Criminal Court's investigations on Duterte's drug war. Meanwhile, the masses continue to grumble at the inability of the elites to recognize their plight, dignity, and agency.

While this article makes a belated contribution to the discussion of Duterte's populism, I hope that the insights, reflections, and results of this research can help faith-based organizations and local church communities in refining their social advocacy programs, whether they are responding directly to the problem posed by the drug war or to the larger sources of disenfranchisement that have made Duterte's populist regime possible and still popular until today. Some of the ideas in this work may also be beneficial in other places where populism has become inimical to social advocacy, human rights, and faith communities. With the Catholic Church having just completed the Synod on Synodality, the call to continue to walk with God's people, especially the poor and disenfranchised, remains an urgent and constitutive part of proclaiming the Gospel. Given these considerations, the path to becoming a synodal church in the Philippines will require learning from the lessons offered by the populist challenge. Going on this journey requires the participation of the disenfranchised, recognizing them, as well as seeking ways of reparation and reconciliation that acknowledge the faults, hurts, and resentment of the various agents. **M**

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⁶⁷ Chris Fitzgerald, "Nothing Bloodless about Marcos, Jr.'s Drug War," *Asia Times*, July 31, 2024, www.asiatimes.com/2024/07/nothing-bloodless-about-marcos-jrs-drug-war/.