

Philippine bishop: Church open to dialogue with Aquino on birth control

MANILA, Philippines – The president of the Philippine bishops' conference said the church was open to dialogue with President Benigno Aquino III about his proposal to distribute contraceptives but said the plan could be considered an "accessory" to abortion.

"Abortion is a grave crime, excommunication is attached to (it)," said Bishop Nereo Odchimar of Tandag. He told church-run Radio Veritas that excommunication was a "proximate possibility" but said the bishops would exhaust "all peaceful means" for dialogue and support peaceful protests planned by lay organizations.

The Asian church news agency UCA News reported the issues of birth control and reproductive health made headlines in Manila after Aquino announced during a late-September U.S. visit that his government "might provide assistance to those who are without means if they want to employ a particular (family planning) method."

Some said the remark shows the president is open to handing out contraceptives, a move the church opposes. The church considers drugs that prevent implantation of an embryo in the uterine wall abortifacients.

The bishops and the presidential spokesman said they have written each other to talk about the issue, but neither side indicates it has heard back from the other.

UCA News reported that on Sept. 29, the head of the Philippine bishops' Commission on Family and Life accused the United States of meddling in Philippine affairs.

"I'm certain that the U.S. government influenced President Aquino's abrupt decision to support population control," said Father Melvin Castro, executive secretary of the commission.

He said if the United States is sincere in helping Filipinos, it should give aid with “no strings attached” and without preconditions.

“Assistance should be selfless,” the priest said.

Monsignor Pedro Quitorio, editor of the Philippine bishops’ news service, said the bishops’ conference did not believe the United States was meddling in the affairs of the Philippines and did not believe the United States had influenced Aquino’s position on birth control. He pointed out that earlier this year, “Aquino was already, though not very categorically, espousing that stance.”

“Cardinal Ricardo Vidal of Cebu, in fact, already warned the church of the position of Aquino on life issues,” Monsignor Quitorio told Catholic News Service in an e-mail Sept. 30.

After the Radio Veritas interview, Aquino issued a statement that said. “We are all guided by our consciences. My position has not changed. The state’s duty is to educate our families as to their responsibilities and to respect their decisions if they are in conformity to our laws.”

In the Philippines Sept. 29, lay organizations met to plan actions to protest against the president’s statement on distributing contraception. Among the lay organizations represented were the Knights of Columbus, Couples for Christ-Foundation for Family and Life, Couples for Christ and diocesan representatives of the Episcopal Commission on Family and Life.

Eric Manalang, president of Pro-Life Philippines, said the organizations would ask Aquino to disclose details of the \$434 million grant he received from the U.S.-run Millennium Challenge Corp. and to issue a statement clarifying his stand on contraception.

Church officials also have protested a proposed Reproductive Health bill pending in the Philippine Congress.