Letter from Manila: The Wages of Sin

Now showing: AIDS in the Philippines, a Catholic Church production

January 1, 1999 By Luis H. Francia

I'll say this about Filipinos: Scratch one of us and you'll find a schizophrenic. Island hedonists at heart we may be, but living in the only Christian country in Asia, we're burdened by more than 400 years of Catholicism. A part of us celebrates the body, the other denies and castigates it. These dialectical extremes, mirrored in everyday life here, stand out starkly each spring during Holy Week, the Catholic Church's most somber period, when the whole country shuts down.

Many of us take off for the beaches or mountains to pamper ourselves. But a whole range of others, some women, mostly men—from farm laborers to corrupt cops—publicly flagellate themselves into a bloody mess on roads and highways. A few of these penitents have themselves nailed to crosses. We admire their devotion, their appetite for pain: To us, they're not freaks, just a part of the landscape. The week after, the penitents revert to their usual ways, receptive to the demands of the flesh, the bloodletting serving as a spiritual vomituria for their real and imagined guilty pleasures.

In the public sphere, the contradictions can be hilarious: Until recently, the government board of censors decreed that baring one female nipple was fine but baring two wouldn't do—the former deemed artistic, the latter obscene. Back in the late '80s, under President Corazon Aquino, a deeply conservative Catholic, Manuel Morato, the chief censor, refused even these equivocations: He advocated burning films he deemed immoral; banned Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, reportedly without having seen it; and would have cut, had government higher-ups not intervened, the little nudity (hardly erotic!) from *Schindler's List*. The support this capricious man received from church officials only underscored the essentially medieval nature of our Catholicism, modeled not on that of modern secular Spain but the Spain of Torquemada's Inquisition, with its abhorrence of the flesh and its view that only the married can fuck and then only to have kids.

In that light, condom usage is seen as morally repulsive, its role in HIV prevention undercut. The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines in its first and only pastoral letter on AIDS, issued in 1993, called for a recognition of "the moral dimension of the disease" and urged Filipinos "to take a sharply negative view of the condom-distribution approach to the problem." Condoms condone "sexual permissiveness," said the bishops, who also claimed that AIDS is transmitted mainly "through promiscuous sexual behavior." But what frightened the good bishops most was the link between condoms and family planning. They worried that the "acceptability of condom use" for

HIV prevention would lead to its widespread role in contraception.

The letter was a response to the active endorsement of safe sex and artificial birth control by Juan Flavier, MD, minister of health under President Fidel Ramos. Flavier shook the church with his advocacy; he sometimes even handed packets of condoms to visitors. Flavier was quickly condemned by Jaime Cardinal Sin (his real name), the most prominent church official in the Philippines, who lives opulently in the aptly named Archbishop's Palace (in a country where the per capita income is a little more than $1,000) and who once famously said that the poor love to have large families (in a country whose annual population growth rate is a high 2.32 percent). Sin savaged the use of condoms as irresponsible and immature, and blamed AIDS on "homosexuality, promiscuity and drug use."

Such disturbing pronouncements do little to combat the spread of HIV, especially since sex is still the major means of HIV transmission in this country, accounting for 70 percent of the estimated 18,000 infections in 1996 (a number expected to climb to 40,000 by the year 2000). And such moralizing discourages HIV positive individuals from coming forth to get tested or seek treatment. The sense of shame about the disease is so widespread that, to this day, I have never seen an obituary mention AIDS as a cause of death. Clearly, AIDS has provided another bully pulpit from which to wax moralistic. But what the church really fears is the subversiveness of desire and its perceived threat to stability—traceable, for them, to exile from the garden, with the human body as a sort of malignant tree.

In the eyes of the Filipino church, an HIV positive individual is of dubious moral character—if deserving of a sort of obligatory compassion. The church fathers would be horrified to hear that someone like Liza Enriquez, who is HIV positive, and her husband, who is HIV negative, use condoms while having sex. A 33-year-old live wire, Liza lives at Bahay Lingap (Tagalog for "shelter house"), an airy, pleasant hospice in the midst of a dusty, rundown Manila neighborhood. She says she contracted the virus from her previous husband, an Italian immigrant who was already HIV positive when they married, a fact he failed to tell her until he began to experience the visible onset of Kaposi's sarcoma. He died in 1993, in the small southern city where they lived. Shortly after, Liza tested positive.

When Liza chose to share this news with her family, she dreaded that they would disown her. To her surprise, the whole family, even her father, a Christian minister, proved supportive. The next year, in 1994, with their encouragement, she flew to Manila and announced her status by holding a press conference. It was, to say the least, unusual. Very few HIV positive people come out here; they are usually ostracized, their condition seen as God's punishment.

Her new husband, an overseas contract worker, understands and accepts her condition. How could he not? His own brother died of AIDS. Aware of the church's view of condoms, Liza says in Tagalog, "I'm sure the church will be angry with me, but I have a right to a husband, to have some happiness."

On the other hand, the church maintains a tolerant, even benign, attitude toward the current

president, Joseph Estrada. (During his 1998 campaign, the married Catholic openly admitted to fathering and maintaining five families, and no church official, other than Cardinal Sin, castigated him.) Since 1994, Liza has been a guiding light of Bahay Lingap and a member of its board. She also helped to found Pinoy Plus, a support group for people living with HIV, frequently acting as its spokesperson. She used to take protease inhibitors, far too expensive here for most PWAs, but had to stop due to serious side effects, though she remains healthy.

Listening to Liza's struggles against the moral stigma of AIDS reminded me of a story recounted by Nenet Ortega, a counselor with the Remedios AIDS Foundation in Manila, one of about two dozen nongovernmental organizations that provide HIV services in the Philippines. In the southern city of Bacolod, where some of the country's largest sugar plantations are and some of the poorest Filipinos live, a peasant worker got the virus. In a rural community like this one, secrets last as long as a shanty in a hurricane. The man was forced to leave his community. Having nowhere to go, he built a small hut on the edge of a nearby plantation and lived there till he died, in pain, isolated and scorned, no doubt pointed to by the community elders as an abject reminder of the wages of sin.

Asked what she thought about the Catholic hierarchy's views on AIDS, Nenet replied with a crusty *"Lecheng simbahan 'yan!"* or "That damned church!" Making AIDS a moral issue, she says, encourages families to disown HIV positive members or, at the very least, to carefully hide their condition. "Their attitude is 'You've brought shame on us,'" she says. "'What have you done with your life?'" In her work, she hears too many stories with this grim leitmotif. She decries an approach to sex education that's muted by religious strictures: "Hygiene is about it," she says of the limited educational offerings in parochial schools, "and then it is integrated into the social arts!" Needless to say, condoms aren't discussed by most teachers.

When I spoke by phone to Kyara Cruza, an executive at Caritas, a Catholic agency with an AIDS unit, just bringing up the idea of safe sex made her uptight. While Caritas asks people to "follow their three Rs" ("respect for life, reverence for the life-giver, responsibility"), "we do not," Cruza said emphatically, "promote condoms." Instead, she said, "we give emphasis on self-love, respect for yourself." She paused, then stated, "It's beyond condoms." When I insisted on a less abstract explanation, and asked how she could reconcile working on AIDS prevention with an anti-condom policy, she suddenly became cold, and abruptly ended our discussion: "I don't like how this interview is going. Please formalize your questions and fax them over." Clearly, I had transgressed: Had my talk been an occasion for sin?

In interviews with other clerics, this thin protective sheath assumed enormous proportions. I wasn't surprised. In the continuing interplay between sexual repression and illicit pleasure, the condom has been perversely fetishized by the church. The hierarchy may downplay its importance, yet they focus most of a pastoral letter on it. Emblematic of the male body, the condom provokes the most fervent of responses from the church faithful.

I asked Marilen J. Danguilan, a public health analyst and author of *Women in Brackets* (a study of efforts by the Vatican and Philippine Catholic Church officials to arm-twist attendees at the 1994

UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo to avoid issues like abortion and contraception), whether there was hope for change in the church's condom policy. "The church is in darkness, in total, obliterating darkness," she said. "If you have HIV, don't have sex. You can't use condoms, you can't use anything."

In examining the relationship between Catholicism and AIDS here, one realizes the parallel irony, that Catholicism itself—as a colonizing force—has acted as a kind of cultural HIV virus toward its host. It has systematically attacked native "antibodies," weakening our immune systems by nearly eradicating indigenous cultural forms, relegating women to a subordinate role and, during the Spanish occupation, persecuting and even killing Filipino reformers and revolutionaries. Thanks to the church, we have become Other to ourselves, our bodies beasts to be chastised, our carnal desires sinful. This is the darker side of our national schizophrenia, and one of its effects is to hopelessly dilute sound prevention policies based on the real sexual lives of Filipinos. Facing up to AIDS here means, in large part, facing down the church—and that may take a miracle.

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