
Guided by Niklas Luhmann’s sociological theory of social systems and modernity, the study explores the political role of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP). It seeks to describe: (1) how the CBCP understand its political role, (2) how the CBCP formulates its political pronouncements in ways that are acceptable to the political system and consistent with its religious identity, (3) how the CBCP deals with problems arising from its political engagements, (4) how the political role of the CBCP shapes Church-State relationship in the context of the Philippine societal transition toward modernity.

The study used the official documents of the CBCP as primary data to observe how it was made necessary distinctions to craft its political role. It is clear that the CBCP understands its political role through its own religious code. The CBCP engages in politics in its capacity as a moral shepherd focusing in the formation of conscience. This basically means that it observes and judges political issues using the binary distinction of moral/immoral according to Catholic principles.

The analysis further shows that CBCP tends to form its political pronouncements in a prudent, moderate, and balanced formation. This tendency reflects its attempts to manage the paradoxical character of its political role. First, it has to reconcile its political engagements with its leadership role in the Catholic community. In this regard, the CBCP has consistently restrained itself from participating in partisan politics and conflicts which might trigger division within the Church and undermine its teaching authority.

Second, the CBCP has to reconcile its desire to demonstrate the political relevance of the Catholic Church with its recognition of the autonomy of the political system. To manage this tension, the CBCP has consistently located its political struggle in civil society and upheld “critical collaboration” toward the government.

The CBCP has become an influential actor in Philippine politics. The political system recognizes its power because the CBCP is perceived to have an organizational capability to mobilize Church’s resources to influence the formation of political decisions. This reflects the transitional character of the Philippine society. Despite the presence of functional differentiation of religion and politics, as manifested in the constitutional principle of Church-State separation, the society still allows religious actors to hold remarkable power to influence politics.

The study, however, reveals that the CBCP has showed enough self-restraint in its political role. It will keep up its struggle to influence Philippine politics but only through democratic means. This means that the CBCP does not have the final word in the formation of political decisions. It is just one of the actors in civil society.