

‘It seems life no longer has any value nowadays’

Church starts days of prayer against ‘blasphemers, murderers’ in nationwide gatherings

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Church people light candles during a gathering in Manila to pray for an end to killings.

—GRIG C. MONTEGRANDE

Leaders of the Catholic Church on Monday presided over a thinly veiled counterattack against President Rodrigo Duterte’s assaults on the country’s most dominant religion and God himself, marking the start of days of prayer for protection against what a Church statement said were blasphemers and murderers.

In Baguio City, at least 800 bishops and priests from parishes in Northern Luzon gathered for a weeklong retreat in response to a call made by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) to storm the heavens with prayers to end attacks on the Church and a cycle of violence that has alarmed many.

Vatican represented

This was the first time in decades that dioceses in Northern Luzon held a retreat together, said Fr. Oliver Mendoza, rector of Mary Help of Christian Theology Seminary in San Fabian town, Pangasinan province.

The retreat at the Baguio Cathedral would run until July 20 and would be attended by the papal nuncio, or Vatican ambassador to the Philippines, Archbishop Gabriele Giordano Caccia. They were expected to fast and give alms from July 17 to 19.

Mendoza said the retreat would also commemorate the Year of the Clergy and Consecrated Persons.

“They will offer prayers and penance for the sins of murder, blasphemy and sacrilege,” said Lingayen Dagupan Archbishop Socrates Villegas.

God help us

CBCP, in a statement that followed the President’s rants against the Church and God, said the prayers were meant to invoke “God’s mercy and justice on those who have blasphemed God’s Holy Name, those who slander and bear false witness, and those who commit or justify murder as a means for fighting criminality in our country.”

Without naming the President, who had called God “stupid,” CBCP admonished those “who arrogantly regard themselves as wise.”

In Cebu City, Archbishop Jose Palma led his flock, the biggest in the country at 4 million, in seeking God’s help for an end to killings, fake news and blasphemies.

Palma celebrated Mass past 10 a.m. on Monday at the Carmelites Monastery in the village of Mabolo, Cebu City.

“We’re fighting not against flesh and blood but against evil,” Palma said.

“So we offer prayers and sacrifices for those who blasphemed God, bear false witness by spreading fake news and those who commit murder or justify the killings,” he said.

“The culture of impunity persists and it seems that life no longer has any value nowadays,” Palma said.

“Amid the insurmountable problems, we draw close to God and put our trust in Him,” he added.

During Masses on Sunday, three bishops in Negros Occidental called on the faithful to heed the call of CBCP for prayers.

No politics

Bishops Patricio Buzon of Bacolod City, Gerardo Alminaza of San Carlos City and Louie Galbines of Kabankalan City said they and their flock were in communion with all dioceses in the country.

Buzon said that, through its pastoral letter calling on prayers, CBCP “invited us to follow the way of Jesus and be peacemakers in these turbulent times.”

“We are to speak always from the perspective of faith and morals, never with a political or ideological agenda in mind,” Buzon said in a letter citing the CBCP circular.

Alminaza said “the blood of all those killed without due process definitely calls for justice and reparation.”

Tyranny

Msgr. Meliton Oso, executive director of the Jaro Archdiocese Social Action Center, said the faithful on Panay Island were heeding the call for prayers.

Oso said parishes had been given leeway on how to take part in the CBCP event which could include hourly prayers and fasting.

Leaders of different Christian denominations were coming out with a joint statement against growing “tyranny” and unabated killings not only of drug suspects but also priests and human rights advocates.

Fr. Marco Sulayao, chair of Promotion of Church People’s Response in Panay, said Christians needed to speak as one. —*Reports from Tina G. Santos, Yolanda Sotelo, Ador Vincent Mayol, Carla P. Gomez and Nestor P. Burgos Jr.*

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