

Philippine Catholic schools cry foul over tax plan

Critics view proposal to have church educational institutions pay tax a response to criticism of controversial govt policies Philippine Catholic schools cry foul over tax plan



A proposal to tax religious institutions in the Philippines, especially Catholic schools, has drawn an angry response from church leaders and school administrators.

Some sectors view the proposal as a reaction to church opposition to the proposed re-imposition of capital punishment.

"Apparently, [House Speaker Pantaleon Alvarez] has been irked by the position of certain schools against the proposed bill," said Jesuit Father Joel Tabora, president of the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP).

The House leader said he did not raise the issue in response to Catholic bishops criticizing the government's anti-drug campaign, which has resulted in the killing of at least 7,000 people, and the push to revive the death penalty.

On March 6, ahead of the final vote on a proposed bill that would revive capital punishment, Alvarez asked the Department of Finance to furnish Congress with the income tax returns of religious institutions in the past three years.

He said the Catholic Church and other religious groups should be taxed for running schools and owning properties.

"These schools don't cater to the poor. They always increase their tuition fees," he said. "I think it's high time that they should be taxed," Alvarez said.

The Philippine Constitution, however, exempts charitable institutions, churches, convents, and education institutions in the country from paying tax.

'Stop bad-mouthing Catholic schools'

"I think it is time to stop bad-mouthing private and Catholic schools for the contribution they are making to Philippine education," Father Tabora said.

He said funds from 1,500 schools under CEAP "are plowed back to improve educational operation of the schools."

Father Tabora said the "rationale" for tax a exemption for Catholic schools is "because they are contributing to the Philippine educational system, the quality of which the state has ultimate responsibility."

He pointed out that long before public schools were instituted in the Philippines Catholic schools were operating, among these were the University of Santo Tomas of the Dominicans, the Ateneo de Manila University, and the Universidad de Santa Isabel.

Bishop Roberto Mallari of Nueva Ecija, head of the Commission on Catholic Education of the bishops' conference, welcomed a review of the tax exemptions, saying it is an opportunity for the government to recognize the service Catholic schools provide to society, especially the poor.

"It is good that [the government] gets to know more about Catholic schools and see the good that they are doing," said the prelate, adding that the government should instead support religious institutions to "maximize the good" that they can do.

Bishop Pablo David of Kalookan said if the government provided quality education, the church would not be running schools.

"State resources are not enough to provide decent education to all its citizens," he said, adding that the church is doing the government a "favor."

"People who go to church-run schools are taxpayers too, but they don't rely on public education because they believe that their children would get a better education in church-run schools," said the bishop.

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