

Reviews

women in brackets

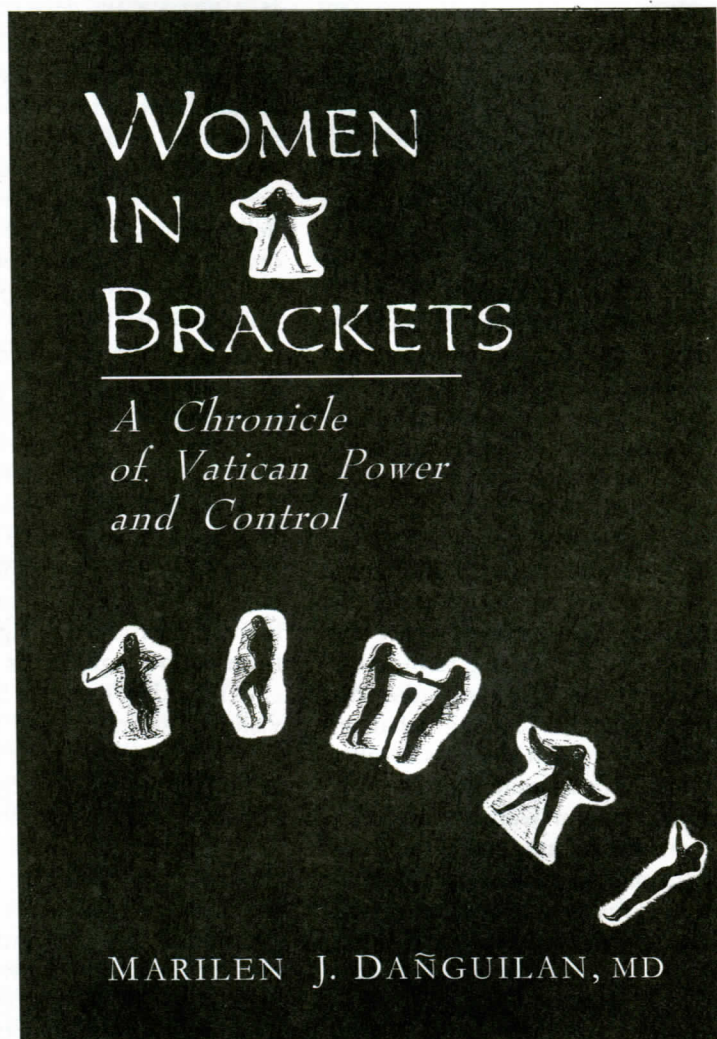
A Chronicle of Vatican Power and Control

Marilen Danguilan, M.D.

Review by Patricia Fe C. Gonzalez

I first got acquainted with Marilen Danguilan's views through her first book, *Making Choices in Good Faith*. I could relate instantly with her views, as they were so down to earth, freed from assertions that start with moral judgements instead of from where people are.

I then got a chance to meet Dr. Danguilan personally in one of the roundtable discussions on reproductive health and rights sponsored by the Family Planning Organization of the Philippines (FPOP), where I was working part time. FPOP and other women's groups were the target of attack of the Catholic Church hierarchy and pro-life advocates over the issue of artificial contraception and abortion. To help create a venue for dialogue between women's reproductive rights advocates and religious people, in order to honestly look into where each individual is coming from, and discover current thinking among rank and file religious Christians. FPOP organized a small group dialogue between church people and women advocates on the ethical and moral issues



surrounding reproductive health and rights. The discussion was meant to establish areas of unity and disunity and, from there, move to a larger audience and see whether a saner approach to the issue is at all possible. When asked about her views on the ethical and moral questions on reproductive health and rights, Dr. Danguilan responded by raising more questions: Who sets moral principles? How do ethical principles come about and who sets them? When it comes to policymaking in relation to reproductive rights, who speaks for whom? What are the ethical considerations on population aid and loans, on biomedicine and reproductive health? What are the ethical considerations governing relationships? Why the rampant incidence of violence against women? These questions later became a guide in our dialogue with other sectors. But shortly after that short, very thought-provoking discussion, Dr. Danguilan, left the country. "What a loss to the Philippine women's movement here," I thought. Marilen Danguilan is one of very few individuals in the Philippines who dare articulate openly their views on the question of women's reproductive rights, despite the inquisitorial mood of the Catholic community, especially some sections of the church hierarchy and laity. I thought that I could no longer ask her the questions that were bothering myself as a Christian and a budding feminist. I thought that Dr. Danguilan had been "silenced." I thought that perhaps the woman who was so reflective and passionate about her personal views on women's reproductive rights became exasperated with the senseless paranoia of men of the cloth. *Women in Brackets* proves me wrong. Dr. Danguilan simply hibernated, gathering her thoughts, preparing to come back with a vengeance.

Women in Brackets as its secondary heading says, chronicles the moves of the Catholic hierarchy, from the local Philippine church to the Vatican authorities, to influence and make its presence felt in the international conferences in Cairo and Beijing, two important conferences that really made a difference for women worldwide. It records the interference of a church listening only to its own views and stubbornly sticking to them, no matter who or what is sacrificed. *Women in Brackets* is a satirical description of the deliberation processes in Cairo and Beijing, where terms or phrases that different groups could not attain consensus were enclosed in brackets. Take a look at some of those words: equal, equitable, people-oriented, race and ethnicity, gender, equal access to education, sexual orientation, reproductive health, unsafe abortions, sexual harassment, domestic work, other unions. Words like these would be debated on, kept, dropped, deleted, or changed depending on how debates and negotiations proceeded, until the final papers were approved by the whole conference. Reading through Dr. Danguilan's book, one can at least appreciate the work in mind and emotions that have gone into the documents.

As I follow the debates on the "brackets," I cannot help but reflect on my own questions and discernment processes. My interest in the issue of reproductive rights stems from my own questions and anxieties regarding the inner logic of the vision of society I used to believe in, a vision which considers non-essential feminism, creation spirituality, and women's autonomy.

Coming from a religious background, I give real significance to the moral and ethical grounds of my decisions. It is like second nature to me. I remember how I would consult fellow religious and even moral theologians in choosing the form of

my social involvement. Sometimes, it happened in very informal settings, where I simply presented the dilemmas I was caught in. Sometimes I did this in more formal articulation of questions, and sometimes even in collective processes or catharsis. I honestly factored other people's views into my own personal deliberations even as I made the final decisions myself. The process of discernment was never easy. Often, I became filled with much anguish, as each major choice meant a confrontation with an old self and a complete detachment from previously held views and beliefs, and yes, even of lifestyles.

Fortunately, those theologians from whom I sought counsel embraced a moral theology grounded not only in doctrinal teachings but also in the anguish and dilemmas—and joys too—of human living. I am suspicious of decisions spawned more by rules rather than by deep thought, observation and discussion. For me, extreme forms of legalism deprive people of a God-given grace called "free will."

The Vatican and the institutional church need to be reminded of the attitude of Jesus to the human condition. The image of Jesus dealing with the confrontation between the prostitute and the moral guardians of the people reveals Jesus' basic attitude to human dilemmas: "He who has no sin amongst you, cast the first stone." It was an indictment of an attitude that is more concerned with laws rather than with understanding the human condition, with cold philosophical "heavenly" virtues and principles rather than with the questions and concerns of real people.

This should apply to any institution or organization of power, be it church, state, ideological parties. More often, such institutions consider power as a relationship of domination, rather than a facilitator of liberation and the flowering

of genuine freedom. People must now be aware of the fact that the question of women's reproductive rights and women's oppression as a whole has something to do, more than anything else, with relations of power. And in this power conflict, women stand as victims rather than as "criminals" as some sections of society would have people believe. This attitude bears no mark of compassion to the anguish and trauma that many women undergo in making reproductive choices.

Some representatives of government were presented in Dr. Danguilan's book as having openminds on the question of reproductive rights. Some stood by the hard-line church position. By and large however, government representatives represent a section of our society where *realpolitik* rather than *prophetic witness* can be expected. Playing "diplomat" or playing "prophet" seems a difficult choice for men and women in government positions. While the book cannot serve as a critique of government's population and reproductive health policy, Dr Danguilan, as she interpellates her own position on the debate, makes a categorical statement that asserts women's inalienable right to decide for themselves and to have full autonomy over their own bodies. Dr. Danguilan does not at all free the state of any responsibility for its use of power and dominance in the name of economic growth and sustainability, or for blaming women for overpopulation and even environmental degradation and imposing policies that violate women's autonomy.

Far from the church leaders' insinuations that progressive women are "fetus killers," Dr. Danguilan presents them as women who understand the conditions of other women. We may, for instance, wish our heart out that there were no abortions in the world but the fact

FAR FROM THE CHURCH LEADERS' INSINUATIONS THAT PROGRESSIVE WOMEN ARE "FETUS KILLERS," DR. DANGUILAN PRESENTS THEM AS WOMEN WHO UNDERSTAND THE CONDITIONS OF OTHER WOMEN.

remains that millions of abortions happen everyday and millions of women die of "unsafe abortions." We can also wish our heart out that HIV/AIDS is not here with us. But the fact remains that the number of people afflicted with the disease is growing at an alarming rate everyday. The problem is concrete. The solution must start from where the problem is and where it is coming from, and not from any airport decision of what is correct and incorrect, moral and immoral by people who admit not having experienced the same parallel dilemma. It was deepened understanding of feminism that clarified for myself the starting points from where the issue has to be addressed and resolved. For instance, the question is not whether one is for or against abortion. The questions are much larger than this and the answers are not black or white.

Some church leaders are concerned that a liberal attitude towards sexuality will only lead to permissiveness and decay of moral values. That is a negative view of what could be a positive appreciation of sexuality, which makes people celebrate it as a wondrous gift rather than as a disgrace. In making daily choices, people will sin and make mistakes. It is the responsibility of people in positions

of authority to ensure that the sanctity of each individual's conscience remains inviolable. I recall one of my religious mentors: "Sometimes religious teachers leave no freedom for our students to choose what is right or wrong. We install structures that checks whether they go to Sunday mass or fulfill this or that Christian duty. We do not even give them the freedom to choose between heaven or hell."

Our church leaders should start to deal with their constituencies as grown-up adults. We are against any form of promiscuity and irresponsible relationships. But having a sense of responsibility, is in itself a process that all individual persons go through. It cannot be imposed from outside. After all, who decides who is responsible and who is not? Is the church's norm of a sense of responsibility the only norm? Should the church impose it to the rest of society?

Women in Brackets consistently raises these important questions. It may well be Dr. Danguilan's close encounter of a rare kind with her church. It could well be ours too. ♪

Patricia Fe C. Gonzalez is a member of the Executive Committee of the feminist organization Sarilaya.