

“I have always loved the Catholic Church”

- Written by [Elaine Ee](#)
- From <http://publichouse.sg/categories/community/item/606-%E2%80%9Ci-have-always-loved-the-catholic-church%E2%80%9D#itemCommentsAnchor>

Full text of Ministry of Home Affairs statement on the Marxist conspiracy

How religious organisations were used

Archbishop told

IN THE religious organisations, Vincent Cheng and his supporters, particularly Kevin De Souza, disseminated Marxist-Communist ideas during what were ostensibly Bible study classes and religious discussions.

They couched their radical ideas in theological language to convince the audience that their ideas had a religious foundation.

They distorted religious doctrines to suit their own objectives and turned religious discussions into Marxist indoctrination sessions.

They condemned the capitalist system, denounced the multi-national corporations for allegedly exploiting the workers, exaggerated class differences, and incited the Christian activists to fight for the "oppressed".

As part of the indoctrination process, they had also invited left-wing speakers from overseas to participate at various so-called religious seminars.

For example, at a talk in September 1966, a Filipino priest, Father Carlos Abrenca, urged his student audience not to be afraid to champion the "freedom of the poor and oppressed" as students were a powerful and influential force.

Communist and left-wing literature was also provided to selected students and Christian activists.

In the Justice and Peace Commission, Vincent Cheng and his supporters had in their publications written articles to incite dissatisfaction with society and urge for revolutionary change.

These publications, the Singapore Highlights and Dossier, had little to do with religion but concentrated primarily on socio-economic issues.

These publications were used by Vincent Cheng and his activists for their discussions and analyses.

Some of these articles

alleged inequalities and injustices of the existing social and political system, and exploitation of the people by the MNCs, and exaggerated the state of poverty among Singaporeans.

They also attempted to arouse the class consciousness of the people by exaggerating the

disparities between the lower- and upper-income groups.

For example, after asking rhetorically whether there was "a shortage of haves and have-nots in Singapore", an article in Dossier last year alleged that there were "children who were half the size they should

have been for their age, due to malnutrition".

An article in last year's July issue of the Singapore Highlights advanced the Marxist argument that wage reforms "are nothing but new ways to exploit labour in favour of capital".

And in an article in The Catholic News, a tabloid with a circulation of about 12,000, Vincent Cheng portrayed the existing system as oppressive and exploitative and made false allegations about oppression and "wrongful beating up of workers by the police" in Singapore.

In January 1966, Vincent Cheng and his supporters brought eight student and Christian organisations together to form the Core (Coalition of Organisations for Religion and Development), ostensibly a co-ordinating body to discuss common problems and identify areas of co-operation, but actually a united front to

Further the Marxist conspiracy.

Having consolidated his existing network, Vincent Cheng, shortly before his arrest, intended to branch out to various parishes to broaden his base under the guise of "justice and peace" work.

The Government decided to register its serious concern over the subversion of religious organisations by Vincent Cheng.

In July 1966, the Minister for Home Affairs met the Archbishop, Monsignor Gregory Yong, and told him that Catholic organisations were being prevented for subversive political ends and the Government could not allow religious publications and organisations to be exploited by any Catholic activists to mount political agitation.

Straits Times, May 1987

As we commemorate the 25th anniversary of Operation Spectrum, former priest Edgar D'Souza gives a detailed and frank account of his experience of that harrowing time.

By Elaine Ee

When Edgar D'Souza decided in the early 1960s, at the tender age of 16, that he wanted to become a Catholic priest, little did he foresee that some 20-odd years later he would get caught up in a web of arrests that resulted in some of his most respected colleagues being detained without trial and he being suspended from the Church he so dearly loved.

For this Selangor-born gentleman, who had come to Singapore in the early 1950s as a child, the Church has always been a source of inspiration.

“I was brought up in a devoted Catholic family by my widowed mother and maternal grandparents,” D’Souza recalls. “From primary school days at St Michael’s, I was an altar boy and saw priests as leaders of a worshipping community. A number of them were also family friends.

“I came to admire priests, the way they guided people in their lives, particularly by assisting the poor and needy through organisations like the St Vincent de Paul society. When I was in secondary school at St Joseph’s Institution, thanks especially to the encouragement of my maternal grandparents, I felt the desire to serve the Catholic community as a priest.”

After a retreat at St Francis Xavier’s minor seminary in Ponggol, D’Souza’s decision to become a priest was sealed. In January 1964, he entered this minor seminary and studied there for a while before moving on to the major seminary in Penang, where he completed his training in December 1972. He was ordained in June 1973.

Shortly after, he was sent to the US for postgraduate studies and returned with a Masters in Religious Education. With that, he began getting involved in the Catholic media and was appointed Associate Editor of the Catholic News and Press Liaison officer to the late Archbishop Gregory Yong.

And that set the stage for the tumultuous events of Operation Spectrum, that forever changed the course of D’Souza’s life and the lives of many others involved in the arrests and left an indelible mark on the history of the Catholic Church in Singapore.

D’Souza shares with **Elaine Ee (EE)** of **publichouse.sg** his vivid memories of that painful period.

EE: When the 1987 arrests took place, what was your initial reaction?

I was utterly shocked. I knew some of those detained personally, as they were workers in church ministries.

Vincent Cheng had studied in the seminary with me and I knew him well. I could not believe he was anything but an ardent Christian who only wanted to follow the way of Jesus Christ. He cared for the poor and marginalised and wanted justice for all—especially for the voiceless and down trodden. At that time he worked with Fr Joseph Ho of the Justice and Peace Commission. Vincent was executive secretary.

I knew Ng Bee Leng, a social worker, who worked with Fr Guillaume Arotcarena, director of the Geylang Catholic Centre, assisting foreign maids who had issues with their employers. The centre offered refuge to foreign domestic workers and had lawyers acting pro bono for them. Teo Soh Lung was one of these lawyers.

I knew lawyer Tang Lay Lee and her work with the Young Christian Workers group in Jurong with Fr Patrick Goh.

And I knew Kevin de Souza (not related), who worked with students from Singapore Polytechnic. Through him I offered spiritual support (offered masses and gave talks particularly on the church's social teachings) to a students' group.

All these people were working with the Catholic Church and following her teachings in the light of Vatican Council II, which saw the role of the church to realise Jesus' views and teachings in a modern world.

EE: What made you decide to speak up for church associations that were implicated in the arrests?

After the detentions, the media (particularly the foreign media and Catholic media overseas) sought information regarding the detainees and wanted comments from the Singapore Catholic Church. The Archbishop was not keen to talk to the media directly. His preferred modus operandi was to issue statements. He did this as he did not want to be misquoted.

The families of the detainees sought support from the Catholic Church. They went to the priests who had worked with the detainees. They wanted to make clear that their loved ones were doing church work and not involved in anything political against the government. They also wanted to share personal information about their detained family members.

The priests involved with these groups met to see what could be done to provide correct information about the detainees and support their families. As the Archbishop's Press Liaison officer, I was the one who contacted the media.

When I worked in the Catholic News office (which was just walking distance from Archbishop Yong's residence), I usually met him once or twice a day for meals.

I continued to do this after the detentions and these meetings allowed me to brief the Archbishop on what was going on and kept him updated on what I was doing and who I was speaking to from the media.

Soon after the detentions, the Archbishop called a meeting of all his priests to discuss the detentions and what the church needed to do to support the church workers that had been detained.

The meeting took place on 28 May 1987. The Archbishop, with his priests, issued a press statement that was to become the basis of a [pastoral letter](#) jointly written by him and his priests. I recall the Archbishop signed both the statement and the letter as head of the Singapore Catholic Church. He then instructed that the pastoral letter be read at all masses on the weekend of 30-31 May.

The two documents made clear that the Catholic Church was against Marxism as it was contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ. They went on to say that the church had to continue its mission of spreading its teachings on justice, and apply it to social, economic and political issues. They further reiterated that this teaching, which was part of the Church's mission and tradition, had worldwide application and was not derived from any one system of theology.

The documents then expressed confidence in and support for all the Catholic organisations mentioned in the Ministry of Home Affairs 16-page statement on the detentions issued on 26 May 1987.

Next the documents testified to the commitment and generosity of the detained church workers and the organisations they were associated with. Finally the statements ended with the hope that the detainees would be treated justly and humanely and prayed that justice would be done and seen to be done.

When I met the Archbishop on Monday, 1 June, he told me that then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had contacted well-known Catholic Dr Ee Peng Liang the day before, and indicated he wanted a meeting with the Archbishop and a church delegation. Later that Monday, the Archbishop met with his Council of Priests. They drew up a list of 19 persons including nine priests (I was one of them) and lay persons who knew and/or worked with the detainees.

Subsequently, the Archbishop was informed that nine people on his list (including me) were not "accepted" by the government for the meeting.

The meeting took place on 2 June.

Archbishop Gregory Yong was summoned to a meeting with Lee Kuan Yew. After that meeting, the Archbishop apparently did an about turn and withdrew his support for the church workers that had been detained.

EE: What really happened at that meeting and how do you feel about it?

Before the Archbishop left for his meeting with Lee Kuan Yew, I asked the Archbishop if he would make any statement after meeting the PM. He told me that he would not make any statement until he consulted his priests as he did for the pastoral letter.

Later I learnt that after the meeting with the PM, all members of the church delegation were asked to leave, except the Archbishop. They returned to the Archbishop's house to await him.

I was told that the Archbishop was taken to a room where the secretary to the Pope's Representative based in Bangkok, Fr Giovanni D'Aniello, was present. I was told that he had flown from Bangkok and had met with the PM earlier at the Istana. The Archbishop did not know that Fr D'Aniello was in Singapore or that he had met with the PM.

After meeting with Fr D'Aniello, the Archbishop and the PM went to a room set up for a press conference attended by members of only the local newspapers, radio and TV. I do not think the Archbishop expected to be taken in for a press conference. When he returned to his house, he told members of his delegation who were awaiting his return:

“I was cornered.”

I knew the Archbishop disliked talking directly to the media. I believe that he would have wanted to consult his Council of Priests, reflect and pray, then issue a statement, rather than face a press conference without any prior preparation.

I recall that the press conference was televised that night on the local news.

The PM Lee made it clear that while his government would continue to uphold freedom of religion, it would not tolerate the use of religion as “a cover for subversive activities” and would act against those who hid behind religion to spread Marxism or communism.

At the press conference the Archbishop said that after going through the depositions of Vincent Cheng, he had no way of disproving Cheng's statements so he would “take things at their face value for now.”

I believe these words of the Archbishop were not reported in either The Straits Times or on television*. The Archbishop's words were reported in The Business Times on 3 June 1987, but were buried in paragraphs five and eight of an article headed, ‘Vincent Cheng used Church for his own ends. ARCHBISHOP CONCEDES CASE’ **.

The PM then said that it was not the government's practice nor would the government allow subversives to get away by insisting that they had to prove everything in a court of law or show evidence that would stand up to the strict rules of evidence of a court of law.

I was terribly shocked by what happened. I realised that the Archbishop was under immense duress. I think he felt that he either had to back down on his support of the Church workers and priests and the right of the Catholic Church to uphold the Catholic social teachings or face a confrontation with the government.

This resulted in the Archbishop doing what he ultimately did. The Archbishop was a church leader. I do not believe he was astute in political matters.

Later, the Archbishop and his Vicar General (second in command in the Archdiocese) came to see me in the Catholic News office. The Archbishop appeared to be very distraught. He asked me if the next issue of the Catholic News had already been printed. When I told him it had, he asked to look at it. He looked at the front page that carried the full text of his pastoral letter and the photos of the four church workers who had been detained.

Archbishop Yong then instructed me that [this particular issue of the Catholic News](#) was NOT to be circulated and he held me responsible for ensuring this was done.

He then told me he wanted to meet the four priests (Guillaume Arotcareana, Joseph Ho, Patrick Goh and myself) at his house with the same church delegation the next day, 3 June.

The meeting was held at the Archbishop's house.

The Archbishop briefed us of what had happened at the meeting with the PM and then invited the others of his delegation to say what they thought about the meeting. The Archbishop indicated to all of us that the key message was that the PM was ready to detain us four priests unless the Archbishop kept "his house in order."

Fr Patrick Goh asked the Archbishop to tell him and the other three priests if we had acted or done anything that was contrary to the Catholic Church's teachings.

To this the Archbishop said:

"Father, it's not what I think but what they think."

The next day, 4 June, the four priests met to review the previous day's meeting with the Archbishop and we collectively decided to resign from all the official offices we held in the archdiocese. We believed that this would help diffuse the tension between the church and the PM.

I left Singapore for Melbourne on Friday, 5 June, to be with my grandmother, mother and sisters, who had years ago migrated to Australia. The other three priests also left Singapore shortly.

EE: You were subsequently suspended, along with the other three priests involved, the Geylang Catholic Centre shut down, and the Justice and Peace Commission subjected to tighter controls. What are your thoughts about this?

I felt the Archbishop was either coerced to do this by either his own advisers (priests, religious and lay people) or thought that these actions were for the long term good of the Church and its relationship with the government. He must have felt that if he did not "cooperate," the government could "make life hard" for the Catholic church as a whole.

EE: How did your friends and other priests react to what happened to you?

Many of my priest and lay friends expressed deep disappointment with the Archbishop and felt he was a weak leader and he "abandoned" the detained Church workers. They felt he was intimidated to take the steps he did. However, he was just a priest trying his best to do what he thought was good for the Church in the long term—he was not a politician.

EE: Was it solely your decision to resign from your posts in the church?

Yes. The other three priests and I did not want to escalate the tension. We love the church and did not want to hurt it. Each of us said this at a joint priests' meeting at the St Francis Xavier's seminary on 5 June.

EE: What did you do after leaving Singapore?

I went to live with my immediate family in Melbourne. I decided to use my freedom to devote my time meeting with various media in Australia and New Zealand and gave them what I believed was a true and fair account of what had happened. I also met a few prominent Catholic Church leaders in both countries for the same purpose.

EE: Why did you eventually decide to leave the priesthood altogether?

I felt very betrayed by Archbishop Yong. I knew I could no longer work as a priest with him or in Singapore. I also realised on a personal level that I loved a Singapore woman lawyer (with whom I had a long friendship) and wanted to marry her.

Sometime towards the end of 1987, I resigned from active ministry of the Catholic priesthood, and we married in Melbourne in December that year. We are blessed with a wonderful daughter who recently graduated with a Masters degree in Clinical Embryology from Monash University. My wife presently runs her own legal practice in Melbourne.

EE: What has your relationship with the Church been like since?

The Church has always been my "mother" and I have always loved the Church. That has not changed.

Till today, I love the church dearly, as I believed it works to communicate the teachings of Jesus Christ. I also assist with Christian instruction in the Melbourne parish where I worship.

EE: Nearly 25 years on, how do you feel about the events of 1987?

Sad and disappointed that so many people, their families and lives were adversely affected by this action.

I still hold the view that the ex-detainees are people of integrity. I respect their courage and determination. They acted correctly then and were unfairly detained. I am proud to call them my friends.

EE: Is there anything you wish you did differently?

No. I would do it all over again, as I believe in justice, care and service especially for the marginalised and downtrodden.

EE: What is your wish for Singapore?

May Singaporeans today work together to enjoy true freedom and democracy. I hope and pray this will be achieved for the Singapore I still love and cherish.

Here are the links to the various statements:

Statement by [the four groups which D'Souza represented as their official spokesperson](#).

Statement by ex-detainees: [Call to abolish Singapore's notorious Internal Security Act](#).

Ministry of Home Affairs [Response to Media on the Internal Security Act, 29 September 2011](#).

Statement by ex-detainees calling for [Commission of Inquiry](#).

* Cited in Defence statement in the High Court of the Republic of Singapore in Suit No. 3336 of 1987; Lee Kuan Yew versus Derek Owyn Davies, Michael Malik, Review Publishing Company Limited and Times Printers Sendirian Berhad.

** Information from transcript of Press Conference held by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew with Archbishop Gregory Yong on 2 June 1987. This transcript is marked 'CONFIDENTIAL' but was released to the court during the government's legal action against the Far Eastern Economic Review as exhibit 85 (f).

Join [publichouse.sg](#) on Facebook: