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PROCEEDINGS OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON TRANSFORMATIVE IDEAS IN A CHANGING WORLD

THE GLOBAL SOLIDARITY CRISIS


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Religion as a Source of Societal Solidarity Amidst the Global COVID 19 Pandemic: The Case of the Catholic Church in the Philippines

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University of Asia and the Pacific, Pasig City, Philippines

Abstract

Since 2020, the global COVID 19 pandemic has not only challenged the institutions and practice of international cooperation as governments closed borders to prevent the spread of the virus, limited interstate trade and economic exchange particularly in the first months, and respectively prioritized national interests and their citizens' safety, but also highlighted lingering tensions within societies as citizens scramble for their health protection and supplies while being forced into lockdowns by public policies resulting in dire consequences especially among the most vulnerable sectors.

Amidst all these, the Catholic Church, consistent with its religious teachings, has responded with determination and genuine efforts to become an effective partner of the government in the Philippines in addressing the effects of the pandemic within its capabilities and available resources. This paper examines how a religious institution, the Catholic Church, contributed to societal solidarity in the Philippines during a pandemic which has far reaching ramifications beyond its borders since this experience –based on the same universal Catholic teachings– may also be applied in other countries where the Catholic Church operates.

Introduction

Twenty twenty (2020) is the year when the world turned upside down. From a small livestock market in Wuhan, China, a deadly COVID 19 virus rapidly spread to other countries resulting in a once-in-a-century global pandemic that hit almost every corner of the world and every aspect of human life. Nations started closing their borders and focused inwardly on domestic safety and national interests leading to sharp declines in international exchange, trade, and investments challenging time-honored norms and institutions of interstate cooperation.

Within countries, the fragility of societal arrangements has come to the fore, and people instinctively protected their own welfare and self-interests exacerbated by government-imposed social distancing and lockdowns. Times of crises, however, are also times of opportunities, positive changes, and heroism that bring out the best in humanity. This paper looks into the case of the Catholic Church in the Philippines, how it responded to the pandemic, and how it contributed in promoting solidarity.

The Church in the Philippines

Twenty twenty one (2021) is the year when Philippines is celebrating its five hundred years of Christianity, that is, the time when the first missionaries arrived in the islands to preach

the Christian religion in this part of the world. Throughout this long period, the Catholic Church has been at the forefront of nation-building, transforming isolated villages and *barangays* of small ethnic groups into a nation-state that the Philippines is now with all its unique social, cultural, economic and political features. The Church has been playing a significant role in almost every aspect of societal life, in every issue and challenge faced by the Filipinos, and in charting the trajectory of the country's future.

The 500 years of Christianity celebration has been preceded by a nine-year preparation which includes a deep re-examination of the Church and its mission, its historical past and future, its valuable contributions as well as failures that require correction, its relevance in contemporary, globalized world as well as its search for new and effective ways to deliver its message and services adapted to current circumstances and needs. The big event's theme "Gifted to give" captures the call for the Catholic Church in the Philippines to a renewed determination to fulfill its indispensable role of bringing the light of Christ not only to every corner of the country but also to the rest of Asia, being the only predominantly Catholic country in this enormous continent.

The celebration, however, has been overshadowed by the onset of the COVID 19 worldwide pandemic. Suddenly, the mood has shifted from joyful festivity to one of survival, fear, and radical disruptions of ordinary life. However, looking at it from a profound Christian perspective, it may also be possible that the pandemic in a sense has presented itself as an opportunity for the Catholic Church in the Philippines to highlight its role and mission in society as well find its meaning and purpose in times greatest challenge.

The Pandemic hits the Philippines

Like most countries of the world, the Philippines has suffered severely from the global pandemic. With Proclamation No. 922 signed on 30 January 2020, President Rodrigo Duterte placed the entire country under the state of public health emergency which considered the COVID 19 pandemic as a national security threat; thus, empowering the government to use full authority and all available resources in order to implement whatever necessary steps and policies in containing the viral outbreak (Deguma, Deguma, Tandag & Acebes, 2020). Large territories are placed under strict lockdowns limiting movements of people and operations of business establishments, schools, social and public institutions. In most big cities, mass transportation is reduced to the minimum, and work-from-home arrangements as well as online education have become part of daily life. Even with such draconian measures, there have been episodes of surges in viral infections and deaths especially during the early months causing strains in the health care systems in terms of limited facilities and drained personnel. All these expectedly led to a sharp overall economic slow-down. In 2020, the country's GDP declined by 9.5%; it's worst economic performance in decades, resulting in massive unemployment, shortage of supplies of basic goods, rising costs of living, and increase in the number of people below the

poverty line affecting the vulnerable sectors of society most seriously (Venzon, 2021). While the government with the assistance of the private sector, civil society, and international agencies managed to mitigate further damaging effects, it will take quite some time to overcome these enormous challenges brought by the COVID 19 pandemic.

The Church's response

Practically no single person or entity is unaffected by this extraordinary crisis. The Catholic Church, like other institutions, is suffering adversely from its detrimental effects. In the initial weeks particularly, the Church hierarchy, religious and priests as well as lay Catholics were caught off guard in the face of sudden radical changes happening in the practice of faith on top of the overall hardships. As churches closed, public expressions of worship were cancelled, and the usual Sunday Masses of large crowds disappeared. The administration of the sacraments which are the Catholics' main sources of life and grace such as the Eucharist, confession, marriage and baptisms together with the normal festivities and celebrations with family and friends that accompany them, have been strictly limited due to government regulations (H. Vergara, personal communication, May 18, 2021). While the exercise of religion was largely confined to personal practices of piety, the focus has shifted to the small church, the family at home, as families attend online Sunday Masses together, and family prayers such as the rosary and novenas spontaneously grew more bringing harmony, closeness, peace, and spiritual healing amidst the external chaos (A. Lacson, personal communication, May 10, 2021). For many, missing the sacraments and public worship helped them appreciate and realize their true value, and fostered their longing for these spiritual treasures as soon as the quarantine ends (D. Socrates, May 21, 2021).

Since its pastoral services and charitable projects as well the operations and upkeep of buildings and facilities depend significantly on the contributions of the faithful, the Church's finances suffered tremendously. Fortunately, parishioners in some instances came to the rescue to alleviate the financial bleeding in certain ways through donations and fund-raising activities (J. Sencillano, personal communication, May 13, 2021).

As what was initially thought off as a short-term abnormal situation dragged on, the Church soon after adapted and took advantage of the digital technology and social media to respond to the faithful's much needed spiritual nourishment through innovative forms such as "liturgical televisuality" (Sanchez, 2020). Furthermore, this phenomenon helped in fostering community spirit, inspiring financial assistance to various Church needs, as well as social projects and relief services to aid the poor. The yearly popular dawn novena Masses during the advent season called *Simbang Gabi* have become hybrid as some faithful attend on-site in the

Churches while the great majority joined online through live-streaming platforms like Facebook, Zoom and Google Meet (CNN Philippines Staff, 2020). Even religious fiestas in honor of patron saints and sacred feasts have been celebrated in creative ways never seen before

(Regalado, 2020). One indigenous expression of piety that gained renewed popularity in some places, particularly, in provincial areas, is the veneration of sacred images and placing them outside the window of a house or a church which is called *dungaw* (Del Castillo, Del Castillo & Corpuz 2021). It was fostering faith within the family and among neighbors during turbulent times. Also, there are some priests and nuns who went to the extent of going to communities to bring material and spiritual relief directly to the people in terms of food, basic supplies, blessings and sacraments (Lopez, 2020).

As unintended benefits in such turn of events, these online communication and services by Church personnel have boosted efforts to spread the gospel. It is as if the Church has entered into the intimacy of homes, and has now reached far-flung communities as well as Catholics who are not able to go to Church physically during normal times for various reasons. Pastors and lay leaders conducted formation activities such as retreats, homilies, recollections, and doctrinal classes online, and produced podcasts and digital materials imparting spiritual and catechetical education that are accessible at any given time (B. Villegas, personal communication, May 22, 2021).

In the Philippines, the Church and its related organizations are among the first and consistent responders to assist the poor, the marginalized, and the needy at the onset of the pandemic. Owing to the teachings and values of the Church, such efforts are generally spontaneous, decentralized, and motivated by genuine charity. It was a natural actualization of the Church's preferential option for the poor, charity and solidarity, value given to human life and dignity, and its mission of service that bring hope and strength to families and whole communities including non-Catholics (Deguma, Deguma, Tandag & Acebes, 2020). Being a centuries-old institution that has faced all types of challenges and crises of unspeakable proportions historically, the Catholic Church in the Philippines has built a nationwide network in place and a substantial number of generous donors of groups and individuals from the private sector and civil society to undertake various social services and assistance as the pandemic unfolded month after month. Led by lay leaders and some priests and religious brothers and sisters, the Church mobilized its social action centers and other affiliated groups together with countless volunteers to assist the poor and the homeless especially those most affected by the pandemic by undertaking projects such as soup kitchens and free meals for those who are unable to work and cannot meet their basic needs, provision of medicines and health-care supplies, and caring for the sick (Hilarion 2020).

The Joint Secretariat of the Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines (AMRSP) has been quick to mobilize its network to address the immediate needs of street-dwellers, daily wage earners, and those living out of the informal economy. From this initiative, the Vincentian Family's "Vincent Helps" program, for example, started coordinating the relief projects of the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity for the needy. Many consecrated persons like the Sisters of Charity of St. Charles Borromeo and the Daughters of St. Anne

went out to the peripheries in order to distribute basic supplies and food packs from their own fruits of sacrifices (Montecillo & Daral, 2021). Many women religious directly prepared cooked meals for their neighborhood and for the street dwellers, and even for the men in uniform who were manning the checkpoints.

In coordination with the AMRSP, among those to first open their facilities were the Religious of the Virgin Mary, the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres, the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, the Claretian

Missionaries, the De La Salle Brothers, the Religious of the Good Shepherd, the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters-North Province, the Order of Friars Minor, and Order of Hospitalier Brothers of St. John of God. Other congregations also had their own initiatives to support frontline workers, such as the provision of packed meals and medical supplies (including face masks and face shields). Noteworthy are the efforts of the Jesuits' *Tanging Yaman* Foundation, the Pious Disciples of the Divine Master, and the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres (Montecillo & Daral, 2021).

Then there are also countless inspiring stories of small initiatives of self-giving like those Sisters of Charity of St. Charles Borromeo cutting their food allowance to aid the poor households in Tagaytay City, Cavite, a Camillian brother bringing food relief for the affected impoverished family in Quezon City, the bishop of Sorsogon Jose Dialogo baking bread for frontliners, and a Franciscan priest giving a grocery voucher to a family in Sampaloc, Manila (Deguma, Deguma, Tandag & Acebes, 2020).

The National Secretariat for Social Action (NASSA)/Caritas Philippines, the humanitarian, development and advocacy arm of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), invited social action centers of the dioceses and civil society organizations to mobilize communities to assist in the pandemic response by establishing Community Caritas Kindness Stations in different parts of the country where anyone willing to help can donate or share anything useful for the needy such as food, clothing, medicines, etc. so that those in need may go to these stations to take what they need (Caritas, 2020). The idea behind this is to decentralize the humanitarian response so that people of the same community help each other fostering generosity and concern for one's immediate neighbors. The Community Caritas Kindness Stations which started online-turned-community-based charity movement in the province of Sorsogon south of Manila, has been replicated in other provinces such as Negros Occidental, Quezon, Isabela, Palawan, Albay, Lanao del Sur, Bohol, and many more (Caritas, 2020). Likewise, religious congregations like the CICM Missionaries, Franciscans of Our Lady of Divine Providence, Dominican Sisters and the Camillian Sisters have also followed suit and are now managing their own Caritas Kindness Stations (Caritas, 2020).

Apart from these, another initiative is to offer temporary shelter for the homeless in Catholic schools and convents such as De La Salle University, College of St. Benilde, St.

Scholastica, Paco Catholic School, Espiritu Santo Catholic School, and Arnold Jansen *Kalinga* Center while some religious orders and parishes made their schools available for housing medical frontliners like Sto. Nino Parish in Tondo, St. Anthony's Shrine in Sampaloc, St. Mary's College (Religious of the Virgin Mary), Convent of the Holy Spirit, Franciscans Missionaries of Mary in Pandacan, Archdiocesan Shrine of Nuestra Senora de Guia in Ermita, OFM Provincial House in Quezon City, St. John Bosco, Makati, and the OurLady of Peñafrancia Seminary in Sorsogon (Caritas, 2020). "Congregations in the healthcare ministry such as -the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres, which operates the largest network of Catholic hospitals in the Philippines, instituted a plan of action for their hospitals, whether as COVID-19 referral centers, or as secondary hospitals to decongest government health facilities in their areas (Caritas, 2020)."

In another development, Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) together with other umbrella Christian groups, the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) and the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches (PCEC) formed the Forum as a mutual cooperation body to combine efforts and resources in dealing with the humanitarian crisis (Agenzia Fides, 2020). Protestant Bishop Noel Pantoja, at the head of the relief and development services of the church where he belongs, said that "all Christian communities in the country have a responsibility to respond to people's real needs, despite the lockdown" (Agenzia Fides, 2020).

A substantial contribution of the Catholic Church that can never be overemphasized is in the area of addressing mental health issues through formative counselling, pastoral guidance and spiritual activities. The sudden disruption of normal life, the fear caused by contracting the COVID 19 virus, the inability to cope with the death of loved ones, the anxieties caused by job losses and economic difficulties, and the forced physical distancing and isolation from other people due to lockdowns all had terrible effects on the psychological state of many people resulting in the sharp increase of cases of stress, depression and even suicide. Since religion fosters positive attitude, solace, hope and the belief in supernatural support, the Catholic Church—through its spiritually uplifting activities which now have become more easily accessible online such as Eucharistic adorations, processions, novenas, rosaries, Masses, retreats, doctrinal classes, etc.-- is in the best position to help people remain calm, find meaning in suffering, develop inner strength despite difficulties, keep a healthy spiritual being, and therefore, assist those with mental health problems over and above the necessary medical interventions. The Diocese of Kalookan, for example, created a phone in counselling service known as "Covid Hopeline" for those experiencing anxiety and depression (Vatican News, 2020). Generally, Filipinos believe that faith is a very important part of their life, a coping resource to deal with major challenges, and therefore, an effective element in surviving this pandemic (Deguma, Deguma, Tandag & Acebes, 2020).

The priests, religious and bishops are certainly not exempted from the harrowing effects of the pandemic. After all, they are also human beings subjected to same hardships, physical limitations, economic difficulties, isolation, health risks, and mental health issues as anybody else. All these, however, generally led them to going back to the basics of faith and religious life, and a greater appreciation of the true sources of strength which prayer, graces, scriptures, charity and community life. Seeing their important role as “prayer warriors,” many congregations and institutes began daily communal prayers and eucharistic adoration for the end of the pandemic, and for specific intentions of healing of the sick and the protection of medical personnel and various types of frontliners. They also participated actively in whatever directives and initiatives coming from the Church leaders including from Pope Francis. From their initial fears, they managed to see the situation from the big picture and a supernatural perspective.

As consecrated people, we do not easily succumb to desperation. We have the best of weapons that enable us to rise above any catastrophe in life, even that of a global pandemic. So, viewing the mystery of this catastrophe in the light of our faith, and more so, in the light of our consecration, we can clearly see the supremacy of God, who is omniscient and powerful Father. He is still in control! Despite of the chaos that this pandemic has caused, life for us, as religious, must go on (Caritas, 2020).

With the focus on interior life, recourse to spiritual sources of strength, and a deep reflection on their vocation, many saw the events happening as a renewed call to love and serve God and fellowmen. This is the reason why the religious and pastors contributed significantly to societal solidarity amidst the pandemic, highlighting the value and relevance of Christian teachings, especially in times of extreme adversities, and further strengthening the Church institution for the long term.

In this extraordinary period of crisis, the Church hierarchy provided the much-needed and timely leadership to take care of its flock and to assure everyone of hope and meaning in facing difficulties. Early on, The CBCP issued Circular No. 20-05 encouraging the faithful to pray the *Oratio Imperata* in all parishes for protection against the COVID 19 virus. Together with this prayer, the directive also presents specific guidelines to stem the spread of the disease like the prescription to take Communion in the hand, regular changing of holy water in the common fonts, installation of grills and protective cloths in the confessionals, and discouraging the faithful to hold hands during the Lord’s Prayer. Leading by example, the Church leaders became the symbol of hope and the voice of assurance.

Although there were initial frictions with the government, the Church understands well the overwhelming challenges and the urgency of the situation, and cooperated with public authorities in implementing emergency measures to deal with the pandemic. At first, some priests and religious dissented and felt that the lockdowns are oppressive, discriminatory, and unduly restricting religious freedom, and that Church authorities are not even consulted in crafting policies that affect them and their flock. Afterwards, when the seriousness and necessity of these

policies have become apparent, the Church has been quick to cooperate and to offer assistance in whatever way to support and complement government efforts. Priests, religious and lay leaders not only complied diligently, but also helped in the information campaign, in implementing health protocols, and in volunteering personnel services. Some church facilities are offered for quarantine and vaccination sites (Philippine Department of Health, 2021). Realizing the need for the cooperation of everyone in facing the pandemic challenges, the government recognized the valuable assistance from the Church. In particular, the Justice Secretary Menardo Guevarra sought the help of spiritual leaders to bring hope to the people, and dispense counseling and guidance to those suffering from depression and distress, and arrest the alarming increase in the number of suicides during these pandemic times” (Vatican News, 2020).

Even Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte who has been critical of the Church recognized and praised the efforts of the Catholic hierarchy and groups for all their efforts and donation drives to help the needy amid the coronavirus pandemic. At one point, Presidential spokesman, Harry Roque, relayed this message from the President: “the Church’s efforts prove that it is responding to its call to be servant of the people of God, and we are thanking those dioceses and religious congregations who showed accommodation to stranded workers and frontliners, religious and priests who give food to the needy” (Calleja, 2020). The government admits that it cannot do it all alone, and that cooperation from the Church and private sector is essential to survive this pandemic.

Effects on Philippine Society

The preceding parts show how the Catholic Church has been affected by the pandemic and how it has responded throughout the months. Despite being they themselves who were threatened and restricted by the disease, economic hardships, isolation, and psychological stress, the pastors, priests, nuns and lay leaders as well as Catholic schools, hospitals, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and Church-affiliated organizations are not only managing to cope well with the difficulties but are also exemplary in actualizing the strength of Christian teachings in the various initiatives and activities they are carrying out in service of others, particularly of the most vulnerable, and thus becoming key elements fostering social solidarity in this extremely adverse crisis. Organized spontaneously in a decentralized manner and motivated by genuine charity, they are among the first and most consistent responders to the call to help others by providing food, medicines and basic supplies to the needy, offering buildings and facilities to the homeless and frontliners, and offering their services as volunteers in quarantine and vaccination centers. With increasing number of people suffering from mental health issues, priests, religious and lay leaders activated various online platforms to provide counselling and pastoral care in addressing problems related to anxiety and depression. The Church has been quick to adapt to the use of digital technology in diverse creative and innovative ways to reach out to the faithful and to provide them with spiritual services such as online Masses, rosaries, novenas, Eucharistic adoration, retreats, doctrinal classes, and many other formation activities

that fostered hope, positive attitude, meaning in suffering, solace, and family togetherness. Multiplied in countless instances, these are all effective means in promoting social solidarity. Church leaders and Catholics in general have seen these difficult circumstances as opportunities as well to work with other institutions, other Christian groups, civil society organizations, the private sector, and the government itself in both national and local levels in addressing the effects of the pandemic, and in so doing contributed to promoting national solidarity. Working together and complementing the efforts of public officials illustrate that Church and State can effectively collaborate for the sake of the common good. All these mean that this time of trial is an occasion for the Catholic Church in the Philippines to emerge stronger and renewed in its true mission entrusted by its founder.

This domestic experience can serve as a possible model in other countries where the Catholic Church operates with considerations and adaptations based on particular and respective conditions. After all, the same Catholic teachings are the foundation and motivation of fellow Catholics living in other nations.

Pope Francis, the head of the universal Church, has always urged his followers to be active participants in world affairs insofar as they relate to the common good and integral human development.

The Church, while respecting the autonomy of political life, does not restrict her mission to the private sphere; on the contrary, she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the building of a better world. The Church has a public role over and above her charitable and educational activities. She works for the advancement of humanity and of universal fraternity. She does not claim to compete with earthly powers, but to offer herself as a family among families, this is the Church, open to bearing witness in today's world. The Church is a home with open doors to build bridges, to break down walls, to sow seeds of reconciliation (Pope Francis, 2020).

When the Church fulfills this role, it not only serves its faithful and leads them to their final destiny, but also uplifts the whole humankind, promoting global solidarity and a world where everyone lives in peace and unity.

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