

The Performance of the Christian Faith under a Populist President: The Case of the Philippine Church under Duterte¹

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Abstract: President Rodrigo Duterte has been consistent in his attacks against the Catholic Church. True to his campaign promise, he has unleashed his brutal “war on drugs” which has resulted to the deaths of thousands of suspected drug dependents and pushers. In response to his criticisms and the excesses of his anti-illegal drugs program, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines has issued various pastoral statements in faithfulness to its mission. Nevertheless, the majority of Filipinos continue to support Duterte and his anti-illegal drugs stance. In this context, the call of Pope Francis’ for the church to become a “field hospital” becomes all the more pastorally relevant.

Keywords: War on drugs • Catholic Church • Field hospital • Human rights • President Rodrigo Duterte • Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines

Introduction

The Philippines has never had a chief executive in its history who has had no qualms in attacking the church and who in the process has not lost any political capital.

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For instance, during the celebration of the 120th anniversary of Baptists in the Philippines on 16 January 2020, President Rodrigo R. Duterte once again launched a tirade against the Catholic Church, attacks which drew the laughter and applause of his audience.² In the face of such a populist president³ who has embarked on his “war on drugs” and all its attendant human rights abuses, it appears that the church is a divided community. On one hand, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) has issued pastoral letters criticizing the excesses of the president’s statements and the human rights abuses brought about by the government’s drug policies. Individual bishops have also spoken openly against extra-judicial killings in their localities. Various local churches have established their drug rehabilitation centers and programs in response to the government’s criticisms that the church has not done anything about the drug-problem.⁴ On the other hand, there are

² Darryl John Esguerra, “Duterte Lambasts Catholic Church Anew in Curse-Laden Speech before Filipino Baptists,” 16 January 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1214254/duterte-lambasts-catholic-church-anew-in-curse-laden-speech-before-filipino-baptists> (accessed 26 January 2020). During what was National Baptist Day, the anti-Catholicism of the audience reared its ugly head (Jayeel S. Cornelio, “National Baptist Day: Laughing instead of Mourning,” 21 January 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/249837-opinion-national-baptist-day-laughing-instead-mourning> [accessed 27 January 2020]).

³ See Nicole Curato, ed. *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte’s Early Presidency* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2016); Nicole Curato, “Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope: Populism and Duterte’s Rise to Power,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 3 (2016):91-109; Nicole Curato, “Flirting with Authoritarian Fantasies? Rodrigo Duterte and the New Terms of Philippine Populism,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47/1 (2017): 142-53.

⁴ Paul Jeffrey, “Detox, Rehab, Food: Parish Works to Fight Philippine Drug Problem,” 6 September 2016, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/parish/detox-rehab-food-parish->

members of the Catholic Church, including ordained ministers, who consider the president's iron-fist approach as necessary. Many even consider it as a fight against evil and as a defense of the innocent. Despite the many statements of the hierarchy against the abuses of the Duterte administration, the president's approval and trust ratings remain excellent⁵ and in spite of the obvious abuses committed in the drug-campaign,⁶ it remains popular among the citizenry.⁷

This paper focuses on the statements of Duterte against the church, the responses issued by the CBCP to the administration and the drug war, and the challenges with which Duterte's presidency confront the church. In

works-fight-philippine-drug-problem (accessed 28 January 2020); Catholic News Agency, "Church in Philippines Responds to Drug War with Rehab Centers," 27 October 2016, <https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2016/10/church-philippines-responds-drug-war-rehab-centers/> (accessed 28 January 2020). Under the leadership of Bishop Virgilio David, the Diocese of Kalookan started Task Force Salubong, its drug rehabilitation program, in October 2016, see <https://dioceseofkalookan.ph/pastoral-program/salubong-rehabilitation-program-for-drug-defendants/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁵ "Pulse Asia: Duterte's Approval, Trust Ratings Surge in December 2019," 23 December 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/247683-duterte-trust-approval-ratings-pulse-asia-survey-december-2019> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁶ Jodesz Gavilan, "Big Majority of Filipinos See 'Many' Human Rights Abuses in Duterte's Drug War – SWS," 13 January 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/249142-filipinos-see-many-human-rights-abuses-drug-war-sws-survey-december-2019> (accessed 28 January 2020). See Philippine Human Rights Information Center, *The Killing State: 2019 Philippine Human Rights Situationer*, January 2020, <https://www.philrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/WP-Copy-2019-HR-Sit.pdf> (accessed 7 February 2020).

⁷ Regine Cabato, "Thousands Dead. Police Accused of Criminal Acts. Yet Duterte's Drug War Is Widely Popular," 23 October 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/thousands-dead-police-accused-of-criminal-acts-yet-dutertes-drug-war-is-wildly-popular/2019/10/23/4fdb542a-f494-11e9-b2d2-1f37c9d82dbb_story.html (accessed 28 January 2020).

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the first part, I give examples of the president's criticisms of the church hierarchy and the church's teachings, and his responses to perceived attacks from local church leaders of his person, actions, and policies. The examples that I provide are meant to be representative and not exhaustive of all that Duterte has said against the Catholic Church. Second, I make a survey of the statements of the CBCP prior to and after the election of Duterte. Many of them are in reaction to the president's statements while others are in response to government policies that are deemed inimical to the people's well-being. Nevertheless, it is apparent that there is a disconnect between the statements of the bishops and the ordinary Filipino's support for Duterte. This is why, in the third part, I argue that the church's leadership, both the clergy and the lay, needs to grapple seriously with this difference. Such a "struggle" demands *ad intra* more convincing efforts on the part of the local church to truly listen to the aspirations of the people who appear to see Duterte as their "savior." Since his style of governance has been divisive, the Catholic Church is called to become a "field hospital," an instrument of healing of a fractured Philippine society. It is only when the local church performs its faith in this regard that it will become credible in denouncing the abuses that are committed by the present administration and in the process, help in healing the nation.

Duterte's Statements about the Church, Its Teachings and Its Leaders

When he assumed the office of the president, Duterte showed that he was not afraid to confront the church and from the very beginning, did not bother hiding his disdain for its leaders, its (lack of) witnessing and its teachings. Perhaps, his antipathy toward the church was due to his

claim that he was molested by a priest in a Catholic school where he studied as a young boy. In addition, when Duterte was mayor of Davao City, his most vocal critic was a priest.⁸ And then, even before the 2016 presidential elections, the CBCP released a statement which arguably was an exhortation to the electorate not to vote for him. It would seem that Duterte himself interpreted that as an attack against him: “*Ang hindi kasi nakuha ng Simbahan, napaka-bobo naman kasi itong Katoliko. Tapos ngayon, nagsabi pa, hindi daw sila nagkampanya. Eh ‘yung tatlong bishop na nagsalita against me?*”⁹ Of course, politically and historically, the institutional church has been the only institution that has been able to stand toe-to-toe with the state so to speak. For an authoritarian like Duterte,¹⁰ he would like nothing more than to discredit the church and diminish its influence on the nation.

What has Duterte said about the church and how has he reacted to its criticisms of his policies, particularly his pet project, the “war on drugs”? It would appear that his criticisms of the church focus on the credibility of the church as an institution, the credibility of its leaders and the intelligibility of its teachings.¹¹ Each point would be

⁸ See, the blog entries of Fr. Amado Picardal, CSsR, “Web Journal of Fr. Amado Picardal, CSsR,” <http://amadopicardal.blogspot.com/> (accessed 26 January 2020).

⁹ Jing Castañeda, “Clergy Not Cowed by Duterte’s Attacks,” 24 May 2016, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/halalan2016/nation/05/24/16/clergy-not-cowed-by-dutertes-attacks> (accessed 27 May 2016).

¹⁰ See, Walden Bello, “Rodrigo Duterte: A Fascist Original,” 9 February 2017, <https://www.cetri.be/Rodrigo-Duterte-A-Fascist-Original?lang=fr> (accessed 26 January 2020).

¹¹ In their study of 13 of Duterte’s speeches against the Catholic Church in 2017, Chua, Labiste, and Rara of the College of Mass Communication of UP Diliman argue that Duterte’s attacks can be classified as “hate speech,” which is defined as “‘abusive, insulting and demeaning and stirs up hatred vs. individuals or groups.’ The intention of such language is to attack the dignity as well as

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elaborated in what follows.

Duterte is a person of contradictions. On one hand, he has professed respect for the church but on the other hand, he could not help himself but criticize the Catholic Church, opinions which betray his own profession of respect. There was time that he claimed that he was no longer a Catholic but at another time, said that he was one. At the heart of Duterte's dislike and even hostility toward the church is his view that the Catholic Church is "the most hypocritical institution in the Philippines."¹² For instance, when he won the May 2016 presidential elections but still has to be sworn in as president, he said: "*Ito lang mga obispo na sobrang yabang, akala mo, marunong. Sabi n'ya, we the church will criticize immorality. How about you? Why have you not criticized yourself or ask pardon from the Filipino people?*"¹³ He also said: "*Naka-gold pa. 'Yung inuman, 'yung mga gold. Karaming mura na baso diyan sa Quiapo, pa-gold-gold*

dehumanize and diminish its targets" ("Digong vs the Catholic Church," 14 December 2017, <https://upd.edu.ph/digong-vs-the-catholic-church/> [accessed 28 January 2020]). When the target, which in this case is the church, is dehumanized, it makes it much easier for state actors to subjugate, silence and repress it. The same could be argued about the situation of suspected criminals in the drug campaign. If and when suspects are not recognized as human beings with inherent dignity and rights, it makes it easier on the part of others to punish and kill them. This will partly explain why in spite of the lack of due process in the "war on drugs," there has been no uproar about it. The general populace have accepted the narrative that they are less than human and that they deserve what is happening to them.

¹² "Philippine Leader Duterte Vents at 'Hypocritical' Catholic Church," 22 May 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-politics-church/philippine-leader-duterte-vents-at-hypocritical-catholic-church-idUSKCN0YD00H> (accessed 27 January 2020).

¹³ "Duterte: Join the 'Iglesia ni Duterte,'" 24 May 2016, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/nation/05/23/16/duterte-join-the-iglesia-ni-duterte> (accessed 27 January 2020).

pa kayo. Tapos tayo pa ang mag-gastos. Unang koleksyon, 'yung pangalawang [koleksyon], para 'yun sa pamilya nila, maniwala ka."¹⁴ While he said that priests have their own families, Duterte also claimed that 90% of priests are homosexuals.¹⁵

He also said that he had a different concept of God: "It's only one God, God the Father. He's not even the father. He's God, period."¹⁶ He even joked about having a new religion, "Iglesia ni Rodrigo."¹⁷ This was not the first time that he made a reference to that. Prior to assuming the presidency, he already told people to join the "Iglesia ni Duterte." He said that his "religion does not limit anything. All you can do is... Do not believe in hell. When you die you are just a piece of carcass and that's it. There's no more hell – about hell – burning in hell? You cannot burn a soul."¹⁸ It is apparent that he considers his criticisms of the church in light of the country's national hero, Jose Rizal: "*Ang tingin ko kay Rizal, talagang god* (I think of Rizal as a god), he's my hero and others also, Filipinos who died for the nation. Rizal stood against the

¹⁴ Nestor Corales, "Duterte's Attack vs the Catholic Church Goes On, Tells Prelates to Shape Up," 6 December 2018, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1060778/duterte-attacks-vs-catholic-church-goes-on-tells-prelates-to-shape-up> (accessed 27 January 2020).

¹⁵ Christina Mendez, "90% of Priests Are Gay," 7 December 2018, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2018/12/07/1874888/duterte-90-priests-are-gay> (accessed 27 January 2020).

¹⁶ Pia Gutierrez, "'Most Hypocritical Institution': Duterte Blasts Church Anew," 15 August 2018, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/08/15/18/most-hypocritical-institution-duterte-blasts-church-anew> (accessed 27 January 2020).

¹⁷ "Duterte Jokes about Creating Iglesia ni Rodrigo," 7 March 2019, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x73nl6z> (accessed 27 January 2020).

¹⁸ Virgil Lopez, "Duterte Hits Church Anew, Slams Veneration of Saints Practice," 15 August 2018, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/664205/duterte-hits-church-anew-slams-veneration-of-saints-practice/story/> (accessed 27 January 2020).

Roman Catholic Church. He died for our country, he was shot. And then these Filipinos will go to the church and kneel down.”¹⁹

In his mind, the Christian God is “stupid” with reference to the story of creation in Genesis: “Who is this stupid God? *Estupido talaga itong p***** i** kung ganun*. You created some --- something perfect and then you think of an event that would tempt and destroy the quality of your work.”²⁰ His reasoning goes this way: “Eve ate it and then woke Adam up and asked him to eat it as well. Adam ate it and then malice was born.... Now all of us are born with an original sin. What is the original sin? Was it the first kiss? What was the sin? Why is it original. You're still in your mother's womb and yet to already have a sin.”²¹ He could not accept the doctrine of original sin: “*Eh ‘yan ang hindi ko matanggap*. Very stupid proposition. *Anong kasalanan?* Original sin, *tapos i-baptize ka*. *Basain pa ‘yang ulo mo ng tubig*. *Maniwala ka niyang pari na ‘yan*.”²² For Duterte, “How can you rationalize a God? *Maniwala ka* (Would you believe in one?).”²³ He also criticized the traditional Catholic practice of honoring saints and remembering their departed loved ones: “*Bakit naman, sa bagay ito, tarantado talaga itong mga Katoliko, puta*. *Bakit may All Souls' Day tapos may All Saints' Day*. *Hindi nga natin alam ‘yung mga santo, na kung sino mga gago na ‘yun, mga lasenggo*.”²⁴ Duterte also attacked the church’s

¹⁹ “Duterte Deifies Rizal for Standing Up to Catholic Church,” 8 June 2019, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/06/08/19/duterte-deifies-rizal-for-standing-up-to-catholic-church> (accessed 27 January 2020).

²⁰ “Duterte Asks: ‘Who Is This Stupid God?’,” 23 June 2018, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/06/23/18/duterte-asks-who-is-this-stupid-god> (accessed 27 January 2020).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Pia Rañada, “On All Saints' Day, Duterte Calls Saints ‘Gago,

doctrine on the Trinity: “*Magdasal ka na sa isang Diyos, magdasal ka pa dito sa santong yawa. Isa lang ang Diyos.* (You’re already praying at one God, then you’re going to pray at these cursed saints. There’s only one God.) There’s only one God, period. You cannot divide God into 3, that’s silly.”²⁵ He then continued: “*Yong Diyos mo, pinako sa krus. Tangina. Nakakawala ng bilib. Ako ang Diyos, tapos ipako mo ako? Putangina. Sabihin ko, ‘Lightning, ubusin mo ito. Sunugin mo lahat ng mga erehes’.*”²⁶ In another instance, Duterte stated in response to those who criticize his statements about the church’s doctrine:

Why do you get mad if I hit your god? God is what you conceive him to be. We all have different gods.... They said god will put me in hell. That’s crazy. My god has no heaven or hell. Do you think god is stupid to create hell? What’s my sin? Womanizing? God is all forgiving. God does not know how to put people in hell... Even purgatory is not true. There is heaven, but do not believe that St. Peter guards the gates.²⁷

Duterte’s non-belief in hell would explain an earlier statement that he made: “What I don’t like really is *‘yun bang takutin ka. Pagka maliit pa tayo, magpunta tayo ng impiyerno, magpunta tayo ng impiyerno, kung ano man*

Drunkards’,” 2 November 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/215767-duterte-call-saints-gago-drunkards-november-1-2018> (accessed 27 January 2020).

²⁵ Mara Cepeda, “Duterte Says Christian Belief in Trinity Is ‘Silly,’” 29 December 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/219912-duterte-speech-christian-belief-trinity-silly> (accessed 27 January 2020).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ronald Reyes, “Iglesia ni Duterte? Believe in it – Rody,” 3 July 2018, <https://manilastandard.net/news/top-stories/269540/iglesia-ni-duterte-believe-in-it-rody.html> (accessed 27 January 2020).

*sunugin ng impiyerno na.*²⁸ However, it appears that he is actually confused about heaven and hell:

Me, I have my own God? God who is all-knowing, who's kind. God who does not create hell, does not create heaven. He did not create human beings just to be thrown to hell or to enjoy heaven. My God says that you will live in a – any place where somewhere in the universe. Maybe that's heaven. Hell, maybe a... I don't know. You don't stop moving. You are... There's no kind – there's no clear punishment actually. But hell is a... You say that something unpleasant for the human soul. *Wala pa talaga tayong nakapunta doon. Pero 'yung good and evil totoo 'yan.*²⁹

With regard to the church's opposition to the revival of death penalty, Duterte said it is based on the assumption that there is a god who alone “is allowed to kill”: “...what if there is no God?” He went to question this God: “So, where is now God when a one-year-old baby, 18-month-old baby is taken from the mother's arms, brought under a jeep and raped and killed. So where is God?”³⁰ He proceeded ask a question that has been asked by many a believer: “So where is God? My God, where are you? I believe in God but that is my perpetual question to him. Where were you when we needed you?”³¹ Not

²⁸ Pia Rañada, “Duterte: Come Join ‘Iglesia ni Duterte,’” 7 September 2016, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/145454-iglesia-ni-duterte> (accessed 27 January 2020).

²⁹ Ted Cordero, “Duterte Sees Rizal as ‘God,’ Laments Arrival of Christianity in PHL,” 8 June 2019, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/697050/duterte-sees-rizal-as-god-laments-arrival-of-christianity-in-phl/story/> (accessed 27 January 2020).

³⁰ Tricia Macas, “Duterte Takes on God: Where Are You When a Baby Is Raped and Killed?,” 26 September 2016, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/582763/duterte-takes-on-god-where-are-you-when-a-baby-is-raped-and-killed/story/> (accessed 27 January 2020).

³¹ Macas, “Duterte Takes on God.”

surprisingly, he continued, “It is not enough to say that at the end of the world he shall come to judge the living and the dead. What will be the purpose of all of that if the harms and sorrows have already been inflicted upon the human race?”³²

With respect to the ongoing plans and preparations of the Catholic hierarchy for celebration of the 500th anniversary of the coming of Catholicism in the country, Duterte had this to say:

Anong plano? Wala akong plano. Why should I celebrate the coming of imperialism to my country? They brought religion, fine. But you didn’t have to subjugate my country and made my fellow brothers and sisters under the yoke of imperialism for 400 years. *Kaya ‘yan, kita mo.* They’re being treated as *basura*.³³

This is why he considered Rizal as “*talagang god*” and his “hero” and noted what he saw as an ironic situation: “Rizal stood against the Roman Catholic Church. He died for our country, he was shot. And then these Filipinos will go to the church and kneel down.”³⁴

Duterte also claimed that the Catholic Church thought wrongly that he would refrain from criticizing it for fear of losing the votes of Catholics. He said:

Kanus-a man ko namakak? Dili lang nila gusto akong baba sa Manila kay mobuga ko ug bastos, pero tinuod. (When did I lie? Hindi lang nila gusto dahil bastos akong magsalita, pero totoo.) *Nagkamali lang sila sa akoa og kontra. Abi lang nila mohilom ko kay mahadlok ko mawad-an og boto sa mga Katoliko.* (Nagkamali lang sila sa pagkalaban sa akin. *Akala nila hindi ako magsasalita dahil natatakot ako na*

³² Ibid.

³³ Cordero, “Duterte Sees Rizal as ‘God’.”

³⁴ Ibid.

*mawalan ng boto mula sa mga Katoliko.)*³⁵

In the speech during national Baptist Day that was mentioned in the beginning, he considers himself as the first politician to successfully carry on a battle against the church:

... maybe it's good to bullshit the bishops. It might make you win. Take it from my experience.... You'd notice that they're no longer complaining even if I said bullshit *'yang...*they don't respond anymore. That is how to win the war against the Catholic Church. All you have to say is *'Putangina ninyo,' panalo ka na.*³⁶

With regard to the bishops who were critical of his “war on drugs,” Duterte said: “*Itong mga obispo ninyo, patayin ninyo. Walang silbi iyang mga gagong iyan.* All they do is criticize.”³⁷ He told priests, “don't meddle too much.”³⁸ For him, the church has to correct itself first before it can criticize. “If not I will really be their enemy

³⁵ “When Did I Lie?” Duterte on Church Sex Abuse Cases,” 11 May 2019, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/05/11/19/when-did-i-lie-duterte-on-church-sex-abuse-cases> (accessed 27 January 2020). While Duterte criticizes the colonization of the Philippines by Spain, it appears that he is allowing a regional power, China, to trample on Philippine sovereignty (see Ted Regencia, “Duterte Finds a Friend in China but Critics Cry Treason,” 12 July 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/duterte-finds-friend-china-critics-cry-treason-190712064055601.html> [accessed 27 January 2020]).”

³⁶ Esguerra, “Duterte Lambasts Catholic Church Anew.”

³⁷ Dharel Placido, “Patayin Ninyo: Duterte Says Bishops Better off Dead,” 5 December 2018, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/12/05/18/patayin-ninyo-duterte-says-bishops-better-off-dead> (accessed 27 January 2020).

³⁸ Cecilia Yap, “Duterte Steps Up Attacks on Catholic Church, Priests,” 29 December 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-12-29/duterte-steps-up-attacks-on-catholic-church-meddling-priests> (accessed 27 January 2020).

and I will continue to attack them.”³⁹ In another speech, he said: “You know what, mother f*cker, there’s a war. I have declared war. If not, my country will lose. You priests, you won’t do anything... forgiveness, forgiveness, will forgiveness be enough?”⁴⁰ He also stated:

*Putangina kayong pari dapat nga kayo ang pagbabarilin eh... Putangina mamatay na kayong lahat, wala akong pakialam. (You sons of bitches, you priests, you should be shot... You sons of bitches, you all should die, I don't care.) Wala akong pakialam kung mamatay kayong lahat, maluwan pa ang ating cemetery. Tangina, making me feel guilty about my – kayo ang nauna. (I don't care if you all die, our cemeteries are still spacious. Sons of bitches, making me feel guilty about my – you started it.)*⁴¹

He then went on to issue a seeming threat: “*Magdahan-dahan kayong mga Katoliko* (You Catholics better slow down). Better shut up or else. Extrajudicial killing? Prove it. But killing? Yes, destroy my country and I will kill you.”⁴² Perhaps, the most blatant attempt on the part of the administration to silence its critics in the church is the filing of sedition and other criminal charges not only against the members of the political opposition but also against four bishops and three priests who have been very vocal in their opposition of the “war on drugs.”⁴³

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ “Duterte Slams Catholic Church Anew during Holy Week, Says Forgiveness not Enough,” 16 April 2019, <https://news.yahoo.com/duterte-slams-catholic-church-anew-034459702.html> (accessed 27 January 2020).

⁴¹ Pia Rañada, “Duterte Says Priests Should Be Shot,” 14 March 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/225762-duterte-says-priests-should-be-shot> (accessed 27 January 2020).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Elmor Santos, “CBCP head: Sedition Case vs. Bishops Unbelievable,” 20 July 2019, <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2019/>

Not surprisingly, the government has denied that it has anything to do with the filing of the charges.⁴⁴

Undoubtedly, Duterte uses very colorful language in his tirades against the Catholic Church. They manifest his own personal issues against the church, his misunderstandings of church teachings and his inability to take criticisms in stride. It appears that he is unmindful of the effects and impact of his words as the chief executive against the church and the possible repercussions that may result because of them, especially if they are acted upon by his most fanatic followers. His remarks about the church and its failings actually are in a way reflective, in my opinion, of the ordinary person's disgruntlement with the church. This explains why many Catholics are not bothered by his statements and that many of them have bought his narrative that what he has been doing is necessary in order to save the country.

The Church's Responses to Duterte

The most pressing problem in the Philippines for Duterte is the prevalence and use of illegal drugs. He claimed that there were between 3-4 million drug users although the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency pegged the number at 1.8 million. The fear of Duterte was that the country would turn into a narco-state and during the campaign season, he promised that he would end the scourge of drugs in 3-6 months, a promise left undelivered 4 years into his presidency. He has

7/20/CBCP-head--Sedition-case-vs.-bishops-unbelievable-.html? (accessed 27 January 2020).

⁴⁴ CNN Philippines Staff, "Palace Denies Hand in Sedition Raps vs. Robredo, Opposition Figures over Narco List Videos," 19 July 2019, <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2019/7/19/Malacanang-Bikoy-sedition-case-Robredo-opposition-narco-list.html> (accessed 27 January 2020). The charges have since been dropped.

embarked on a bloody “war on drugs” which has claimed the lives of thousands of suspected drug dependents and pushers, many, if not most, of whom are victims of extrajudicial killings by state actors.⁴⁵ For Reyes, Duterte’s message is clear: “criminals can be humiliated and killed in order to protect law abiding and god-fearing Filipinos.”⁴⁶ Duterte’s heavy-handed approach to drugs (and crime in general) and the human rights abuses associated with it serve as the backdrop of the ongoing conflict between the church and Duterte. In what follows, I focus on the statements of the CBCP as they relate to Duterte and his policies.

Just before the May 2016 national elections which catapulted him into the presidency, the CBCP issued a pastoral statement which acknowledged the “desire for change” on the part of the people but argued that it “could not take not the form of supporting a candidate whose speech and actions, whose plans and projects show scant regard for the rights of all, who has openly declared indifference if not dislike and disregard for the Church specially her moral teachings.”⁴⁷ This statement was an apparent reference to Duterte who at that time was leading in all the polls and seemed to be the likely winner. It must be remembered that the year before his election, Duterte criticized Pope Francis for causing a lot of traffic during his visit to the Philippines and that the reports of the killings in Davao City while he was still

⁴⁵ See the documentary of National Geographic, “Nightcrawlers: Truth Hides in the Darkness” (2019), an exposé of Duterte’s “war on drugs,” <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/films/the-nightcrawlers/#/>.

⁴⁶ Danilo Andres Reyes, “The Spectacle of Violence in Duterte’s ‘War on Drugs,’” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35/3 (2016): 112.

⁴⁷ CBCP, “Prophets of Truth, Servants of Unity,” 1 May 2016, <http://www.cbcnews.com/cbcnews/?p=76660> (accessed 28 January 2020).

mayor were becoming more known and worrisome. Ten days before he assumed the presidency and in response to the rise in the apparent killings of suspected criminals, the CBCP urged the police to follow due process and not to give up on anyone, “even if it be the blood of [the] one we suspect of crime.”⁴⁸

A few months after, on 16 September 2016, in response to killings in general but of suspected drug pushers and dependent-users in particular, the church expressed its solidarity with all those who suffered because of them. With specific reference to drug addicts, it stated,

Our hearts reach out in love and compassion to our sons and daughters suffering from drug dependence and addiction. Drug addicts are children of God equal in dignity with the sober ones. Drug addicts are sick brethren in need of healing deserving of new life. They are patients begging for recovery. They may have behaved as scum and rubbish but the saving of love of Jesus Christ is first and foremost for them. No man or woman is ever so unworthy of God’s love.⁴⁹

The bishops’ claim that addicts have dignity and are beloved of God was not popular among many of the supporters of the “war on drugs.” Again, do take note that Duterte said a month before this, in response to the critics of his “war on drugs”: “Crime against humanity? In the first place, I’d like to be frank with you: are they humans? What is your definition of a human being?”⁵⁰ It

⁴⁸ CBCP, “Pastoral Appeal to Our Law Enforcers,” 20 June 2016, <http://cbcponline.net/pastoral-appeal-to-our-law-enforcers/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁴⁹ CBCP, “I Will Turn Their Mourning Into Joy (Jeremiah 31:13),” 15 September 2016, <http://cbcponline.net/i-will-turn-their-mourning-into-joy-jeremiah-3113/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁵⁰ AFP, “Drug Users Aren’t Human, Says Philippines Duterte,” 28 August 2016, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/drug-users-arent-human->

was also in September 2016 when he said, “Hitler massacred three million Jews. Now there are three million drug addicts. I’d be happy to slaughter them.”⁵¹ In its 22 November 2016 pastoral letter, the CBCP acknowledged the efforts of the Duterte administration to respond to the issue of inequality and to the right of workers to their security of tenure. At the same time though, it echoed the concern of human rights activists in the country:

There can be no opposition between the campaign against drugs and the campaign for human rights. In fact, any opposition renders one or the other meaningless and fruitless. We seek the elimination of the drug trade and an end to the proliferation of habituating substances because they constitute a real threat to well-being. But we cannot be consistent in this resolve by denying some the right to their own well-being, fundamental to which is the right to life!⁵²

On 30 January 2017, the CBCP issued another pastoral letter which dealt solely with the “war on drugs.” At that time, around 7,000 people have been killed since the “war” started, according to Amnesty International. The CBCP letter began with a statement of concern:

We, your bishops, are deeply concerned due to many deaths and killings in the campaign against prohibited drugs. This traffic in illegal drugs needs to be stopped

says-philippines-duterte-110624632.html (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁵¹ Emily Rauhala, “Duterte: Hitler Killed Millions of Jews, I Will Kill Millions of Drug Addicts,” 29 September 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/09/29/duterte-hitler-killed-3-million-jews-i-will-kill-3-million-drug-dealers/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁵² CBCP, “Blessed Is the Nation Whose God Is the Lord! (Psalm 33:12),” 22 November 2016 (accessed 28 January 2020).

and overcome. But the solution does not lie in the killing of suspected drug users and pushers. We are concerned not only for those who have been killed. The situation of the families of those killed is also cause for concern. Their lives have only become worse. An Additional cause of concern is the reign of terror in many places of the poor. Many are killed not because of drugs. Those who kill them are not brought to account. An even greater cause of concern is the indifference of many to this kind of wrong. It is considered as normal, and, even worse, something that (according to them) needs to be done.⁵³

The letter continued: “We are one with many of our countrymen who want change. But change must be guided by truth and justice.”⁵⁴

In the face of the proliferation of fake news in social media, especially in Facebook, in which the “accomplishments” of Duterte were highlighted and in which his critics were denigrated, the CBCP on 21 June 2017 issued a pastoral exhortation against fake news.⁵⁵ It must be noted that since the campaign period for the presidency, the internet, particularly the social media platform, was “weaponized” by the handlers and supporters of Duterte in order to drum up and increase support for him and his policies.⁵⁶ Ironically, a few months after the pastoral

⁵³ CBCP, “For I Find No Pleasure in the Death of Anyone Who Dies – Oracle of the Lord God (Ezekiel 18:32),” 30 January 2017, <http://cbcponline.net/for-i-find-no-pleasure-in-the-death-of-anyone-who-dies-oracle-of-the-lord-god-ezekiel-1832/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ CBCP, “Consecrate Them in the Truth,” 21 June 2017, <http://cbcponline.net/consecrate-them-in-the-truth/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁵⁶ Maria A. Ressa, “Propaganda War: Weaponizing the Internet,” 3 October 2016, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/148007-propaganda-war-weaponizing-internet> (accessed 28 January 2020); Maria A. Ressa, “How Facebook Algorithms Impact Democracy,” 8 October.

letter, the CBCP itself was a victim of a fake news which claimed that the bishops regretted the deaths of the leaders of the ISIS-affiliated Maute group who planned and started the siege of Marawi, a city in southern Philippines.⁵⁷

On 7 September 2017, the CBCP issued a clarion call for the killings to stop and for healing to begin:

Because we Christians are heralds of a Gospel of Life there is no way that one can be a faithful Christian, let alone a fervent Catholic, and yet stay safely quiet in the face of these shocking attacks against human life. The very Gospel that the Church was founded to teach is a Gospel of Life. The Church must either be at the forefront of the intense and fervent struggle against a culture of death or the Church betrays Christ.⁵⁸

It went on to say:

When we label members of our society because of the offenses they commit—or that we impute rightly or wrongly against them—as “unsalvageable”, “irremediable”, “hopelessly perverse” or “irreparably

2016, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/148536-facebook-algorithms-impact-democracy> (accessed 28 January 2020); Chay F. Hofileña, “Fake Accounts, Manufactured Reality on Social Media,” 9 October 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/investigative/148347-fake-accounts-manufactured-reality-social-media> (accessed 28 January 2020); Lauren Etter, “What Happens When the Government Uses Facebook as a Weapon,” 7 December 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-12-07/how-rodrido-duterte-turned-facebook-into-a-weapon-with-a-little-help-from-facebook> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁵⁷ “CBCP Slams Fake News, Denies Mourning Hapilon, Maute Deaths,” 17 October 2017, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/10/17/17/cbcp-slams-fake-news-denies-mourning-hapilon-maute-deaths> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁵⁸ CBCP, “Lord Heal Our Land,” 12 September 2017, <http://cbconline.net/lord-heal-our-land/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

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damaged”, then it becomes all the easier for us to consent to their elimination if not to participate outright in their murder. We stand firmly against drugs and the death drugs have caused, but killing is not the solution of the problem.⁵⁹

It appealed for a period of mourning and prayers for all those who have been killed. In November 2017, the CBCP issued an invitation to begin the process of healing the divided nation, a 33-day period as the time to “Start the Healing.”

All the above CBCP statements were under the presidency of Archbishop Socrates Villegas. On January 2018, Archbishop Romulo Valles, the archbishop of Davao, Duterte’s hometown, assumed the CBCP’s presidency and it led to hopes that there would be a better relationship between the bishops and Duterte. In his first speech before 116th CBCP Plenary Assembly on 27 January 2018, among other points, Valles stated:

... I cannot help myself but mention this – the great opportunity for our local Churches – that those deep in addiction of illegal drugs can come to us, the Church, as a mother that welcomes them home, to their home, with open arms (see E.G. nos. 46-49). From my experience, they are most comfortable and confident to accept and bring themselves to be helped through the initiative and work and programs of the Church. It is an opportunity for us once again to proclaim that each and every life is sacred. Each and every life is to be loved and treasured. We do not want anybody to be killed.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Romulo Valles, “Message of CBCP President Archbishop Valles for the 116th Bishops’ Plenary Assembly,” 27 January 2018, <http://cbcpnews.net/cbcpnews/message-of-cbcp-president-archbishop-valles-for-the-116th-bishops-plenary-assembly/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

It was a theme that was consistent with the statements issued under the leadership of Villegas.

The CBCP was not concerned merely with the “war on drugs” but it was also worried that the efforts to amend the constitution had motives other than the common good. In response to the movement to amend the country’s presidential form of government to a federal one, the CBCP issued its pastoral guidelines about it. In the statement, it averred: “Amending the fundamental law of the land, so carefully crafted for the common good after years of dictatorship, requires widespread peoples’ participation and consultation, unity of vision, transparency, and relative serenity that allows for rational discussion and debate.”⁶¹ The CBCP went on to enunciate the principles that are important in determining the morality of the current efforts. “If the Constitution is to be revised at all, the process should lead to a greater defense and promotion of the above-mentioned moral values of human dignity and human rights, integrity and truth, participation and solidarity, and the common good.”⁶²

The CBCP also issued a statement of support to Sr. Patricia Fox, who was deported by the country’s Bureau of Immigration (BI) for ostensibly violating the stipulations of her visa. Duterte himself admitted that he was the one who ordered her investigated for being critical of his government: “You are a foreigner? Who are you? You do not have the right to criticize us. Do not insult us every

⁶¹ CBCP, “Pastoral Guidelines for Discerning the Moral Dimension of the Present-day Moves for Charter Change,” 29 January 2018, <http://cbcponline.net/pastoral-guidelines-for-discerning-the-moral-dimension-of-the-present-day-moves-for-charter-change/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁶² *Ibid.*

time you open your mouth.”⁶³ The CBCP believed

in the sincerity and dedication of Sr. Patricia to serve our people. We believe further that she is moved to serve our people by the love of Christ.... With a hope for a reconsideration regarding the BI's order after giving Sr. Patricia a chance to explain herself again, in a spirit of dialogue, could she be given a chance to stay and continue serving our people?⁶⁴

Not surprisingly, nothing happened to the pleading of the CBCP.

The CBCP also condemned the killings of two priests.⁶⁵ In response to criticisms that he was persecuting the church, Duterte claimed that he was actually protecting the church since the finding of the investigations “would not be good for the church”:

You want me to show it to the Catholic Church? I will show it to everybody. *Kung yan ang gusto nila, Ilabas ko na lahat, yung nauna na pari na namatay.* There's a matrix there...There seems to be something like an undercurrent going on.⁶⁶

⁶³ Felipe Villamor, “Rodrigo Duterte, Who Bristles at Foreign Critics, Has Begun Deporting Them,” 20 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/20/world/asia/rodrigo-duterte-australian-nun.html> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁶⁴ CBCP, “On the Recent Development: Sr. Patricia Fox, NDS Is Ordered to Leave the Country,” 26 April 2018, <https://www.rcam.org/index.php/component/k2/item/149-on-the-recent-development-sr-patricia-fox-nds-is-ordered-to-leave-the-country> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁶⁵ CBCP, “CBCP Statement on the Killing of Fr. Richmond Nilo,” 11 June 2018, <http://cbcponline.net/cbcp-statement-on-the-killing-of-fr-richmond-nilo/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁶⁶ CNN Philippines Staff, “Duterte: Findings on Priest Killings ‘May Not Be Good for Church,’” 20 June 2018, <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2018/06/20/president-rodrigo-duterte-priests-killing-catholic-church.html> (accessed 28 January 2020).

His “concern” for the church, however, seems to be only lip-service since in a speech before the Philippine Councilors’ League, he alleged that the reason why one of the priests was killed was because of the illicit affairs that he had, a claim that was condemned by the clergy since the slain priest could no longer defend himself from such allegations.⁶⁷

In a pastoral exhortation issued on 9 July 2018, the CBCP issued its most comprehensive statement to date as it is related to the church’s response to the “war on drugs” and its relationship to the Duterte administration. The CBCP acknowledged the difficulties that were being experienced by the church:

We do not fight our battles with guns and bullets. We do not seek protection from those who might wish to harm us by wearing bullet-proof vests, because the battles that we fight are spiritual. In these times of darkness, when there’s so much hatred and violence, when murder has become an almost daily occurrence, when people have gotten so used to exchanging insults and hurting words in the social media, we admonish the faithful to remain steadfast in our common vocation and mission to actively work for peace.” Given the vitriol of Duterte against the church, the bishops noted that this was nothing new: “We are not strangers to persecution and ridicule.”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Darryl John Esguerra, “Duterte’s Hate Story with the Church,” 21 July 2019, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1144135/dutertes-hate-story-with-the-church> (accessed 28 January 2020); Paterno Esmaquel II, “Murder Is Murder,’ Bishop Says as Duterte Hits Fr Mark Ventura,” 21 May 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/202972-duterte-mark-ventura-killing-cagayan-bishop-david> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁶⁸ CBCP, “Rejoice and Be Glad!,” 9 July 2018, <http://cbcponline.net/rejoice-and-be-glad/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

Significantly, the bishops also acknowledged the divisions within the church. While as we have seen, the CBCP has been consistent in its condemnation of the excesses of the “war on drugs,” there were many Catholics, even members of the clergy, who found no problem with it and would even justify the government’s approach. The church leaders admitted that their sufferings are nothing compared to that of the poor. Since the poor are at the receiving end of this “war,” the church must be at their side and defend them. To its critics, the church said: “We do recognise the constitutional provision of the separation of church and state, mainly in the sense of distinction of roles in society. When we speak out on certain issues, it is always from the perspective of faith and morals, especially the principles of social justice, never with any political or ideological agenda in mind.”⁶⁹

On 22 November 2018, Duterte publicly accused Bishop Pablo Virgilio David, a vocal critic of the “war of drugs,” of stealing money from the church in order to give it to his family: “*Ikaw, David, tumahimik ka ha. Sige ka lang hingi ng contribution diyan sa mga – saan ang pera ng mga tao? Ang gago sige lang hingi, may second collection pa.*”⁷⁰ David denied the president’s allegations: “I think he has confused me for someone else. You see, people who are sick sometimes do not know what they are talking about, so we should just bear with them.”⁷¹ In a statement, the CBCP president stated that he was “saddened and disturbed” by the recent statements

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ ABS-CBN News, “Bishop David on Duterte Tirade: Let’s Bear with Sick People,” 23 November 2018, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/11/23/18/bishop-david-on-duterte-tirade-lets-bear-with-sick-people> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁷¹ Ibid.

against David and asked for prayers for him.⁷² However, he did not ask Duterte to refrain from making unsubstantiated allegations.

In its 28 January 2019 pastoral letter, the CBCP expressed an awareness of a question that was in many people's minds: why were the bishops silent in the face of many disturbing issues?⁷³ With respect to the issue of illegal drugs and the government's efforts to eradicate it:

There are people who, perhaps out of concern for us, have warned us about being critical of the government's fight against illegal drugs. Perhaps we need to make ourselves clear about this issue. We are not against the government's efforts to fight illegal drugs. We do respect the fact that it is the government's duty to maintain law and order and to protect its citizens from lawless elements. We have long acknowledged that illegal drugs are a menace to society and that their easier victims are the poor. Like most other Filipinos we had high hopes that the government would truly flex some political will to be able to use the full force of the law in working against this terrible menace. It was when we started hearing of mostly poor people being brutally murdered on mere suspicion of being small-time drug users and peddlers while the big-time smugglers and drug lords went scot-free, that we started wondering about the direction this "drug war" was taking.⁷⁴

⁷² Jon Torres, "Philippine Bishops Stand by Prelate over Duterte Attacks," 30 November 2018, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/philippine-bishops-stand-by-prelate-over-duterte-attacks/83996> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁷³ For instance, see Walden Bello, "The Silent Church," 17 October 2016, <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/149397-silent-church> (28 January 2020); Amado Picardal, "The Silence of the Shepherds," 16 September 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/212093-silence-shepherds-amado-picardal> (28 January 2020).

⁷⁴ CBCP, "Conquering Evil with Good," 28 January 2019, <http://cbeponline.net/conquering-evil-with-good/> (28 January 2020).

In light of what the bishops started to hear, the bishops went on to affirm the sanctity of human life, the inherent dignity of each person, and the inviolability and inalienability of human rights in its teachings:

Our faith informs us that no human being in this world deserves to be treated as a “non-human”, not even the mentally ill, or those born with disabilities. This is consistent with our defense of the right to life even of the unborn, because we believe that all human beings are creatures in God’s image and likeness, imbued with an innate dignity. We also must consider the right to life of people who are brutally murdered just because they are suspected of being opponents of government, as well as those who are summarily executed by armed groups. Everyone in the civilized community of nations would agree that even those who may have committed criminal offenses should be treated in a humane way, even as justice demands that they be held accountable for their actions.⁷⁵

Just before the May 2019 elections, the CBCP urged the electorate to be “very discerning in their votes” since the election was crucial for the country’s future.⁷⁶ Individual bishops also issued their own pastoral letters in relation to the democratic exercise.⁷⁷ The CBCP and the bishops noted that there was a need for checks and balances in the government. Voters were encouraged to

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ CBCP, “Seek the Common Good,” 28 January 2019, <http://cbcponline.net/seek-the-common-good/> (28 January 2020).

⁷⁷ Socrates B. Villegas, “Don’t Leave God When You Vote,” 28 April 2019, <http://cbcponline.net/dont-leave-god-when-you-vote/> (28 January 2020); Antonio J. Ledesma, “Concerned Citizens for Good Governance,” 6 May 2019, <http://cbcponline.net/concerned-christian-citizens-for-good-governance/> (28 January 2020); Broderick Pabillo, “Prepare for the Elections,” 9 May 2019, <http://cbcponline.net/prepare-for-the-elections/> (28 January 2020).

vote for candidates who had the common good of the country in mind. At that point, it seemed more likely that the administration candidates for the senate would sweep the election. Hence, it might be argued that the CBCP's statement was an encouragement, if you will, that voters cast their vote for the opposition in the senate.

When sedition and other criminal charges were filed against four bishops, the president of the CBCP issued a statement in support of them on 19 July 2019. That such charges would be levelled against them is "beyond belief":

That they are accused of sedition and other criminal complaints is for me beyond belief. They may be perceived as very vocal and very critical in their pronouncements. But that they consciously worked promoting seditious activities and other related crimes, these honestly I cannot believe. These are individuals whose love for country and dedication for the welfare of our people I cannot doubt. Some of us may feel ill at ease in the way they publicly made known their opinions. But again, I say this, I cannot bring myself to believe that these bishops were involved in seditious activities; they are bishops whose sincerity, decency, respectfulness and love for our country and our people are beyond doubt.⁷⁸

Then, on 1 August 2019 as the judicial process against the accused bishops started, Valles invited Catholics to show solidarity with them in prayer.⁷⁹ The accused bishops released a joint statement in which they affirmed the following:

We renew our commitment to serve, to teach and to

⁷⁸ CBCP, "on the Accusation of Sedition against Some Bishops," 19 July 2019, <http://cbcponline.net/on-the-accusation-of-sedition-against-some-bishops/> (28 January 2020).

⁷⁹ CBCP, "Solidarity in Prayers," 1 August 2019, <http://cbcponline.net/solidarity-in-prayer/> (28 January 2020).

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bless without relent, without repay. We will not allow this splinter from the cross of Christ to distract us from our mission, to dampen our zeal or to intimidate us.

This cross we carry now is nothing compared to the agony and passion of the Lord and the pains and aches of the poor. Our defense for human life and the sacredness of marriage remains. Our message of peace based on truth will not be perturbed. Our zeal for souls will not falter. Our mission is yet incomplete. We will not be discouraged.⁸⁰

As one can see, the CBCP whether acting as a collegial body or through its president has been consistent in its criticisms of government policies and actions which it deemed as contrary to the gospel and the Kingdom. In addition, individual bishops as pastors in their local churches have also issued such statements critical of the “war on drugs” and instituted practices that provide alternatives to the government’s violent approach. For example, under the initiative of Bishop David, “Stops the Killings, Start the Healing” tarpaulins were placed in every parish church of his diocese, Kalookan. It was a plea to the perpetrators of the killings that they cease sowing terror among the populace and instead, choose to be instruments of healing the trauma and the wounds caused by their violence. It was also an appeal to people to rediscover the humanity of those who have been demonized and to listen to the voice of God as God speaks in the depths of their conscience. Nevertheless, it is another question altogether if Catholics listen to their pastors and heed their message. I now turn to the question of the challenges that the reign of Duterte

⁸⁰ Teodoro C. Bacani, Jr., Honesto F. Ongtioco, Pablo Virgilio S. David and Socrates B. Villegas, “Fraternal Statement,” 7 September 2019, <http://cbcponline.net/fraternal-statement/> (28 January 2020).

presents before the church.

Towards Becoming a Field Hospital

Why is it that despite the many statements of the church against Duterte's problematic policies, his attacks against church leaders and the church's teachings, and the on-going killings of suspected drug users and pushers, he seems to remain popular among the vast majority of Filipinos?⁸¹ Evidently, the issuance of statements by the bishops is not enough. The drug rehabilitation programs, while indeed necessary, are more in reaction to the situation rather than preventive of it. The rise of Duterte⁸² seems to have brought out that which is not the best among Filipinos but the "the formless void and darkness [that] covered the face of the deep" (Gen 1,1 NRSV). In a sense, Duterte opened Pandora's box, unleashing forces, many of which he himself unintended and did not foresee, to put it charitably. He has tapped into his supporter's

⁸¹ His seeming popularity assumes that the surveys done by Pulse Asia and the Social Weather Station are truly reflective of the president's popularity and performance. It must be noted that there is a need to be critical of such surveys since there is evidence of herd mentality and partial disinformation linked to them (Tristan A. Canare, Ronald U. Mendoza, Leo M. Jaminola and Jurel K. Yap, "Unpacking Presidential Satisfaction: Insights from Survey Data on Philippine Presidents," *Ateneo School of Government Working Paper* 20-003, January 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/y9jwew5h> [accessed 29 January 2020]).

⁸² While Duterte projects an image of a being a man of the people, "a champion of the little guy," he was actually born into a life of privilege, being the son of the provincial governor. When he was young, he experienced violence at home, in the school and in the neighborhood, which would explain his strongman persona (see Richard C. Paddock, "Becoming Duterte: The Making of a Philippine Strongman," 21 March 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/21/world/asia/rodrigo-duterte-philippines-president-strongman.html> [accessed 5 February 2020]).

frustrations and fears⁸³ but unfortunately, that has led to the creation and acceptance of a culture that is violent, that lacks accountability for state actors, that has disregard for the truth, that is divisive and sows division, that is fanatical in its support of its leaders, that fails to truly engage in dialogue and is not respectful of other points of view, that is intolerant of dissent, and that relativizes respect for human dignity and human rights.⁸⁴ To say that this ongoing situation is worrisome is an understatement. When violence—virtual, physical and psychological—becomes institutionalized and acceptable to people and when the vulnerable are dehumanized by those in power and their supporters, a re-discovery of the dignity of each person and her or his rights, especially of the one who “fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead” (Lk 10,30 NRSV), becomes more difficult and Jesus’ call to show mercy to him or her like the Samaritan (see Lk 10,37) becomes less audible. It becomes much easier, just like what the Priest and the Levite did, to “pass by on the other side” (see Lk 10,31-32 NRSV).

It would also appear that *Juan de la Cruz* has simply

⁸³ Heydarian argues that one must understand the rise of Duterte in the context of the spread of populism all over the world. He further asserts rightly that in the case of the Philippines, Duterte and his handlers capitalized on people’s dissatisfaction with the post-Marcos “elite democracy” (Richard Javad Heydarian, *The Rise of Duterte: A Popular Revolt against Elite Democracy* [Singapore: Springer, 2018]).

⁸⁴ Tony La Viña is spot on when he says that the present dispensation makes its policy decisions “on the basis of politics and not scientific evidence.” This is evident in its “war on drugs” policy, its response to the Taal Volcano eruption and most recently, its (in)action (or lack of it) with regard to the 2019-nCoV. Unfortunately, such an approach will cause suffering on the part of ordinary people, particularly among the vulnerable ones of our society (Tony La Viña, “The Collapse of National Leadership,” *Eagle Eyes*, 1 February 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/tonylavs/posts/10158117548951967> [accessed 31 January 2020]).

accepted extra-judicial killings, the present day victims of “robbers” in the story of the Good Samaritan, as the “new normal.” Not surprisingly, Bishop David bemoans the indifference and apathy of people to all the killings:

There is a dangerous virus that is spreading faster than the Corona Virus. It is the virus of indifference. It has already infected millions in our country. Symptoms include a deadened conscience that is silently convinced that extrajudicial killing is probably the most effective solution to the problems of criminality and illegal drugs in our country.

We are paranoid about the Corona virus that has hardly infected a single Filipino, but we don’t even seem to care about this virus of indifference that has killed thousands already. Even the mainstream media have stopped featuring its victims in the news because even the latest cases are immediately treated as stale news if they are drug related. How can they be newsworthy if they are “more of the same”?⁸⁵

In many unfortunate ways, the Catholic faith has become domesticated, a phenomenon that would partly explain the people’s silence about and acceptance of state-sponsored killings. Nevertheless, that did not happen overnight. Even before the Duterte administration, many Catholics seem to prefer a faith that is comfortable and that does not question one’s sensitivities and social realities. The Catholic faith has apparently lost its radical element in the way many people, including the clergy, understand and have performed it. It would seem that Jesus’ message and example of love, justice and compassion are selectively enacted and Christians

⁸⁵ Pablo Virgilio David, “At Sino ang Aking Kapwa? (Who Is My Neighbor?) Addendum to My PCNE 7 Talk Yesterday: On the Infectious Virus of Indifference (January 29, 2020),” <https://www.facebook.com/pablovirgilio.david/posts/10215814981584545> (accessed 29 January 2020).

would rather listen to a prosperity “gospel” that does not question the prejudices and antipathy they have toward those who are “othered.” Such a domesticated kind of faith squares precisely with what Duterte and his handlers want to happen—the confinement of the Christian faith to one’s private life and the removal of its relevance in the public sphere. With the effective silencing of the fourth estate, especially those who are critical of his administration,⁸⁶ the only thing left is to relegate the church to irrelevance and hence, remove an institution that is capable of questioning him and his policies.

If the believing community is to be truly church, it must rediscover its prophetic voice in all of this. It cannot and must not remain silent and indifferent to human rights abuses and the failure of the government to be truly at the service of the people. Perhaps, the church needs to be reminded once again of the primary insight of the 1971 Synod of Bishops: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation

⁸⁶ See Jhoanna Ballaran, “In the Philippines, the Biggest Threat to Press Freedom Is Duterte,” 3 December 2019, <https://www.democratic-erosion.com/2019/12/03/in-the-philippines-the-biggest-threat-to-press-freedom-is-duterte/> (accessed 5 February 2020); Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, 3 May 2018, “Speak Truth to Power, Keep Power in Check,” <https://pcij.org/article/894/speak-truth-to-power-keep-power-in-check> (accessed 5 February 2020); Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, “The State of the Media, under Duterte,” 3 May 2019, <https://pcij.org/article/1596/the-state-of-philippine-media-under-duterte> (accessed 5 February 2020); Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, “The President and the Press: A Timeline of Hostilities against the Media,” 4 May 2019, <https://pcij.org/article/1599/the-president-and-the-press-br-a-timeline-of-hostilities-against-the-media> (accessed 5 February 2020).

from every oppressive situation.”⁸⁷ Given the plurality of voices in contemporary society, the church, especially its leaders, must necessarily be dialogical in its approach as it remains prophetic in its words and actions.⁸⁸ In a way, the Duterte presidency is a time of purification for the church, which in the history of the Philippines, easily gets caught up with the trappings of power, wealth, and success. As the church engages in prophetic dialogue, it will be “forced” to rely not on its diminished social capital but on the power of the Gospel as grace works in the lives of its leaders and members. It is precisely from a position of vulnerability that it will resist the empire and speak truth to power.

Duterte’s critique of church teachings on God, the Trinity, creation and the communion of saints is actually bad theology. More than anything, his attacks simply betray his lack of understanding of the things that he purported to criticize. Nevertheless, his kind of theology is reflective, I suspect, of the theology of many of his supporters (and even non-supporters). In this sense, what he has done was to simply surface the confusion among many Catholics about those teachings. Unintentionally, he verbalized it for them. It is not surprising then that many of the Catholic supporters of Duterte have used their faith in order to justify all the killings that have taken place.⁸⁹ While Duterte’s and his supporters’ theology is indeed theologically problematic, the reality is that they think in that manner and see

⁸⁷ 1971 Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*, <https://www.cctwincities.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Justicia-in-Mundo.pdf> (accessed 3 February 2020).

⁸⁸ See Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

⁸⁹ Jayeel Cornelio, “God Gave Us Duterte,” 3 July 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/206394-god-gave-us-duterte> (accessed 7 February 2020).

nothing wrong with Duterte's anti-illegal drugs campaign. In this regard, the church has its work cut out for itself. Given the total number of Filipino Catholics and the number of pastoral ministers, the church needs to institute sustainable and creative means through which people will come to truly know the basics of the Christian faith.

As the church engages in renewed catechesis, the more difficult task is the accompaniment of the victims of all the senseless violence. An example of an initiative to help those left-behind by the victims of extra-judicial killings is *SOW: Support for Widows and Orphans*, a joint project of Ina ng Lupang Pangako Parish, St. Vincent School of Theology and DePaul House.⁹⁰ It is a rehabilitation program for the families of the victims in Payatas, Quezon City. It offers psychosocial interventions and treatments to widows and orphans in order to heal the trauma brought about by witnessing their loved ones murdered. It also offers financial assistance for their basic needs, training for livelihood and education for children. Moreover, it networks with other organizations with the hope of empowering communities and of bringing to justice the perpetrators of the killings. The project is a modest attempt to respond to address the suffering brought about by the unabated killings. Similar initiatives must necessarily be a part of the church's accompaniment of the victims. In this regard, the church will fulfill Pope Francis' call on the church to become a "field hospital" and be a refuge for those who suffer and a source of their healing. It is only in this way, I think, that the church in the Philippines will become credible when it is truly in solidarity with those who are in the peripheries of Philippines, who in their moment of need are also abandoned by their neighbors, people who are in

⁹⁰ See *SOW: Support for Widows and Orphans*, <https://projectsow.weebly.com/> (accessed 29 January 2020).

a similar situation. Perhaps, when the church journeys with the victims of the “war on drugs” – when it allows itself to be vulnerable – it can little by little learn what it means to be truly the Church of the Poor and in its effort to become one with the marginalized, people will come to have faith in the church in spite of all its imperfections.

The church cannot afford to be simply reactive to the “new normal” in Philippine society. The present situation in which many Filipinos just accept the violence in the streets, in relationships, in politics and in the social media did not happen suddenly but is the confluence of issues and problems that were taken for granted. *The* question that confronts the church is: how can it form communities that are compassionate, inclusive, truthful and just? Needless to say, the church cannot do this task alone and needs to collaborate with other stakeholders in responding to the situation. As an initial but crucial step, it can begin to listen to Catholics who are supportive of Duterte and know first-hand from them the reasons why they support him. In this process, instead of alienating and dismissing them as “Dutertards,” the church will perhaps make them feel that they are listened to. I suspect that the church will learn a lot from them, especially as they share their frustrations and struggles, and their hopes and dreams for a better life. Dialogue in this regard will not be easy but the church must remain open to the Spirit as it works in the lives of those who political leanings are different. It will be a long process but it is only by doing so that the church may begin the process of healing the divisions in Philippine society. It must not choose to be an echo chamber but it must learn to listen to voices other than its own, even to sounds that contradict its principles and beliefs, similar to the experiences of health-care professionals as they listen to the “complaints” of their patients. It is only after listening to their stories that it can discern where the

Spirit is leading it at this point in the country's history.

The rise of Duterte has undoubtedly led to the loss of social capital on the part of the Catholic Church. This is due in part to his constant attacks against the institution and the apparent inability of the church to make a dent on his political fortune in spite of its many statements that are critical of his personal actions and government policies. However, the more important thing for the church is not whether it still holds sway over Philippine society but whether it remains faithful to its mission of building the Kingdom in today's world. One thing appears certain in all of this – the church is called to be an instrument of healing of Philippine society that is deeply divided because of political affiliations and orientations, and economic interests. It is only by being a neighbor – the one who acts with compassion and hence, with vulnerability – that the church will begin to become “field hospital,” open to all the victims of injustice and violence. Perhaps in doing so, it will be true to Pope Francis' vision of the church as:

... bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life.⁹¹

To become a field hospital should not be seen as a merely temporary and palliative solution but as a new

⁹¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 49.

way of being church – a church that is out in the streets
and that serves as a beacon of hope for all.

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“The Daily Life of the Poor is Death”: The Poor in the Midst of Covid-19 Pandemic and the Catholic Church’s Teaching on Health Care

Jerry D. Imbong ♦

Abstract: This paper is divided into three parts: The first part deals with the socio-economic problems that the poor are facing in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. The second part analyzes the present condition of the Philippine health care system. Using a “materialist” approach to the sociology of health, the category of ‘class’ is employed as an analytical tool in dissecting health inequalities. In so doing, this paper hopes to provide a critical understanding of the condition of our health care system. It also argues that class structure and inequality are at the roots of inefficient health care in the country. Finally, it offers a critical evaluation of our health care system from the vantage point of the church teaching on health and the recent pronouncements of Pope Francis.

Keywords: Sociology of health • Catholic social teaching • Poverty • Health inequality

Introduction

The adage “the daily life of the poor is death” is found

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in Gustavo Gutierrez’s book “On Job.”¹ It shows that constant struggle, suffering, misery, oppression, and exploitation is the daily lot of the poor which will eventually lead to either sickness or death. In the Philippines, the plight of the poor is further aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the government’s incompetence and ineptness in handling the health crisis. Poor, ailing, symptomatic patients are “sent home” due to lack of space in health facilities. Most of these rejected patients come from urban poor communities who don’t have access to quality and affordable health care.² Meanwhile, those who have the luxury in the midst of crisis: the rich, the political elite, their families, and loved ones have unhindered, immediate access to few testing kits. Working-class and their families suffer from daily hunger and joblessness due to #StayAtHome³ and “no work, no pay” policy and had to rely on government subsidies and food packs while the wealthy and privileged few were able to transform crisis into opportunities as they spend home quarantine enjoying #FamilyBonding, #Relaxation, #Unwinding. Those who refuse to #StayAtHome, cooperate, and obey because they need to go to work to feed their loved ones are subjected to disciplinary actions by State forces. As with the previous “wars” launched by the Duterte regime, i.e., “war on drugs” and “war against terrorism”, this “war against vicious and invisible enemy” is victimizing and alienating the poorest of the poor in society. Concerned

¹ Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (NY: Orbis, 1987), 34.

² ABS-CBN News. “3 COVID-19 patients in QC sent home due to lack of space in health facilities: mayor” (March 22, 2020) https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/03/22/20/3-covid-19-patients-in-qc-sent-home-due-to-lack-of-space-in-health-facilities-mayor?fbclid=IwAR2Ot1F1Aq7_1JXXc_FOIbFhqmUB4KOtYl0JAFuchs_0PIK8MH3KcjoFYc (accessed 22 March 2020).

³ Popular “hashtags” circulating the social media.

that the health crisis might result in massive suppression of peoples fundamental rights (political, civil, cultural, and economic) amidst the turmoil and disruption, a human rights group reminded governments to respect people's right to health, freedom of expression, and ensure access to critical information.⁴ Thus, in the time of COVID-19, the poor are battling two main adversaries: a life-threatening virus and economic hardship that could starve them to death.

This paper is divided into three parts: The first part deals with the socio-economic problems the poor are facing in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the second part, I provided a social analysis of the present condition of the Philippine health care system. Using a "materialist approach to the sociology of health" I used class analysis as an analytical tool in dissecting health inequalities. In so doing, I hope to provide a critical understanding of the condition of our health care system by forwarding an argument that class structure and inequality are the root causes of inefficient health care in the country. Finally, I provided a critical evaluation of our health care system from the vantage point of the church teaching on health and the recent pronouncements of Pope Francis.

COVID-19 Pandemic

Probably the biggest public health crisis of this century, the COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc all

⁴ Human Rights Watch. "Human Rights Dimension of COVID-19 Response" (March 19, 2020) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/19/human-rights-dimensions-covid-19-response> (accessed 23 March 2020); see also "Respect Rights in COVID-19 Response: Recommendations for Governments in Addressing Pandemic" (March 19, 2020) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/19/respect-rights-covid-19-response> (accessed 23 March 2020).

over the world. First detected in Wuhan, China as a pneumonia of unknown cause, it was first reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) Country Office in China on December 31, 2019. It spread rapidly in China recording several thousand cases per day in late January and early February. In less than a week, it quickly spread to other countries where cases of large outbreaks were reported. The virus spread like wildfire from South Korea and Iran to Italy, France, and Germany. This prompted WHO to declare the COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11. As of June 17, the Johns Hopkins University reported more than 188 countries, areas or territories infected with the virus.⁵ The first case of COVID-19 in the Philippines was reported by the Department of Health (DOH) on January 30, 2020, a 37-year old female Chinese national. On March 7, the first case of local transmission was confirmed by DOH. Like most countries, the Philippines was caught off-guard, confused, and unprepared on how to handle the health crisis. Several weeks have passed after the recorded first case of local transmission, still no viable and concrete steps were laid down by the government on how to contain and stop the spread of the dreaded virus. It was only on March 12, a month after the first case of COVID-19 was reported in the Philippines that President Rodrigo Roa Duterte (PRRD) declared a “community quarantine” in the National Capital Region (NCR). Land, domestic air, and domestic sea travel to and from Metro Manila were suspended from March 15 until April 14. On March 16, PRRD elevated it to an “enhanced community

⁵ Johns Hopkins University. “Coronavirus: Which countries have confirmed cases?”. Johns Hopkins University also reported more than 8.2 million confirmed cases including at least 445,000 confirmed deaths around the world. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/countries-confirmed-cases-coronavirus-200125070959786.html> (accessed 18 June 2020).

quarantine” and imposed “stricter measures”, this time over the entire island of Luzon. Under this condition, strict home quarantine was implemented in all households, and mass transportation was suspended. Curfew ordinances were also passed by various local government units. Movement of people was constrained, limiting only to buying basic necessities.⁶ People were advised to #StayAtHome or #WorkFromHome in order to contain the spread of the virus. Uniformed personnel from the Philippine National Police (PNP) and the Philippine Army were tasked to enforce quarantine procedures and set up checkpoints in strategic locations in NCR. As of August 1, 2020, COVID-19 cases has ballooned to 93,354—from a mere 1,847 on March 31.

The poor in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic

The economic impact of the COVID-19 outbreak has rippled across the globe in the first quarter of 2020. As restaurants, shopping centers, factories, airlines, and other business establishments close throughout Europe, Asia, and the United States, millions of people have lost their means of livelihood. Car manufacturers Ford, General Motors, Fiat Chrysler, Honda, and Toyota in North America are shutting down their factories where an estimated 150,000 workers will be affected.⁷ In countries like Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Vietnam, around 40 million garment workers may “face destitution” as garment factories are closing down.⁸

⁶ Azer Parrocha. “PRRD orders ‘community quarantine’ in NCR”, *Philippine News Agency* (March 12, 2020) <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1096467> (accessed 24 March 2020).

⁷ Tome Krisher. “Coronavirus: Automakers shut North American plants over COVID-19 fears.” *The Associated Press*. March 18, 2020 <https://globalnews.ca/news/6698021/coronavirus-ford-gm-factories-close-virus/> (accessed 22 March 2020).

⁸ Annie Kelly, “Garment workers face destitution as COVID-19

Fearing that the world might be facing not only a global health crisis but a “major labor market and economic crisis”, International Labor Organization (ILO) expressed concern over the plight of some “94 percent of the world’s workers” affected by workplace closure.⁹ On March 23, Pope Francis offered a mass for people facing economic hardship “because they cannot work.”¹⁰

In the Philippines, research group think tank IBON estimated that the “real unemployed” and “under-employed” rate will reach 20.4 million which is “the worst crisis of mass unemployment in the country’s history.”¹¹ National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) on the other hand predicted a 3.4 percent “worst-case scenario” contraction of the economy (roughly Php 2.2 trillion) due to job losses.¹²

Under the “no work, no pay” policy, those who are forced to stay at home due to the military lockdown

closes factories.” *The Guardian* (March 22, 2020) <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/mar/19/garment-workers-face-destitution-as-covid-19-closes-factories> (accessed 24 March 2020).

⁹ International Labor Organization. “ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Fourth edition updates and analysis.” (27 May 2020) https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_745963.pdf (accessed 18 June 2020).

¹⁰ Courtney Mares, “Pope Francis prays for people facing economic hardship due to coronavirus” *Catholic News Agency* https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-francis-prays-for-people-facing-economic-hardship-due-to-coronavirus-88709?fbclid=IwAR1_TzIeZmODK2O-Yo_VuiyG-3bKtpfg5URA_Jt9rt_6zTroLNGt-V0wg5Q [accessed 24 March 2020]

¹¹ IBON. “Official unemployment figures understate historic jobs crisis.” *IBON Media & Communications*. (June 5, 2020) <https://www.ibon.org/official-unemployment-figures-understate-historic-jobs-crisis/> (accessed 18 June 2020).

¹² de Vera, Ben O. “P2.2 trillion in losses: Cost of COVID-19 impact on PH economy.” *Inquirer.net* (May 28, 2020) <https://business.inquirer.net/298536/p2-2-trillion-in-losses-cost-of-covid-19-impact-on-ph-economy#ixzz6Nn2kQO5U> (accessed 18 June 2020).

receive no compensation. According to Sonny Africa of research databank IBON, of the 7.5 million low-income families in Luzon, around 5.2 million are considered “poorest” (with a monthly income of less than Php 10,000). These people may “face the greatest difficulties amid the lockdown.”¹³ Based on IBON’s estimates, more than 14.5 million workers who are mostly breadwinners and informal earners “are going to be dislocated by the lockdown, mostly vendors, shopkeepers, construction workers, salespersons, pedicab, tricycle, jeepney and truck drivers, and mechanics in the transport sector.”¹⁴ The list does not include the 1.3 million officially reported as unemployed in Luzon in 2019. The Php 5,000 wage subsidy promised by DOLE is a welcome relief for these displaced workers. However, it is still uncertain as to how long the government can provide financial assistance to poor communities. Furthermore, human rights groups are concerned over the government’s “overly militarist” approach to solve the health crisis. Progressive lawmakers from the MAKABAYAN Block express concern over Duterte’s “obsession that the solution to any problem is force, bullying, and the power to set aside anyone who does not follow.”¹⁵ Many are asking why in the midst of a health crisis the health department is seemingly absent in the government’s efforts to defeat the virus. It appears that more than ever, a militarist population control seems to be given more priority over

¹³ Sonny Africa. “Duterte administration’s bumbling, stumbling COVID-19 response.” IBON. (March 21, 2020) <https://www.ibon.org/duterte-administrations-bumbling-stumbling-covid-19-response/?fbclid=IwAR1pIxkgUwDd8jrulmXRaQNMosLORB2if8NPNB2ogPHQkZ2lq7hnwEHsIZZM> (accessed 22 March 2020).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ ACT Teachers Party-List. “Makabayan Block: Duterte emergency powers may be more dangerous than COVID-19”. March 23, 2020 https://web.facebook.com/ACTteachers/posts/2827698897298853?__tn__=K-R (accessed 24 March 2020).

health measures and socioeconomic relief. Amidst the health crisis and the worsening economic condition of the people, President Duterte certified as urgent the Anti-Terrorism Bill (ATB) which was swiftly approved by Congress and Senate. The controversial bill which was met with fierce opposition from various sectors around the country will allegedly trample on civil and political rights enshrined in the 1987 Philippine Constitution. Civil society groups question the untimely passing of the said bill while millions of Filipinos are still suffering from the economic impact of the pandemic. On June 5, seven activists from the University of the Philippines in Cebu were arrested for staging a peaceful protest outside the university. The protesters were detained for days for allegedly violating quarantine protocols. Activists fear that the said arrest is a prelude to a more rampant violation of people's rights once the ATB becomes a law.

The poor may survive the dreaded virus but they need to face more chronic problems: hunger, joblessness, State repression, and violence. They are being ostracized, ridiculed, and demonized in social media. Those who insisted on going to work to have food on their table and refused to #StayAtHome were called “stubborn”, “hard-headed”, “uncooperative”, and “undisciplined”. Low-income Filipinos in poor-quality jobs or precarious work—or work that is insecure, low-paying, without benefits¹⁶ and contractual workers who earn their living on a subsistence basis: they are the faces of the 14.4 million poor Filipinos in slum areas in Luzon who lack the much-needed benefits such as medical and social security in times of calamities.

¹⁶ IBON. “3 of 5 workers in Luzon will likely lose wages, earning due to Luzon lockdown.” March 18, 2020 <https://www.ibon.org/3-of-5-workers-in-luzon-will-likely-lose-wages-earnings-due-to-luzon-lockdown/> (accessed 22 March 2020).

A medical problem requires a medical solution, not a military action. No less than WHO's top emergency expert Mike Ryan asserted that public health measures are needed to curb the spread of the virus:

...what we really need to focus on is finding those who are sick, those who have the virus, and isolate them, find their contacts, and isolate them... the danger right now with the lockdowns... if we don't put in place the strong public health measures now, when those movement restrictions and lockdowns are lifted, the danger is the disease will jump up back.¹⁷

But why is there a seeming absence of “strong public health measures” in our country? Why is the government resorting to military action (lockdown, checkpoints, arrests, detentions) instead of a more viable medical solution?

The State of Philippine Health Care System

A Materialist Approach to the Sociology of Health

An in-depth discussion and analysis of the current situation of our health care system is necessary to understand the dismal response of the Philippine government on the health crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. In analyzing the state of the Philippine health care system, I use a “materialist approach to the sociology of health”¹⁸ as a way of

¹⁷ Alistair Smout. “Lockdowns not enough to defeat coronavirus: WHO's Ryan” *Reuters* (March 22, 2020) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-who-ryan/lockdowns-not-enough-to-defeat-coronavirus-whos-ryan-idUSKBN2190FM> (accessed 25 March 2020).

¹⁸ A materialist approach to the sociology of health emphasizes “those social, political, and economic factors both beyond the control

dissecting health inequalities. In so doing, I hope to provide a critical understanding of the condition of our health care system and argue that class structure and inequality form the social basis for inefficient health care in the country. It is “critical” in its approach in as much as it seeks to “question previously taken-for-granted aspects of social life.”¹⁹

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were able to develop and produce “one of the earliest, identifiably sociological theories of health.”²⁰ They were convinced that sickness and diseases “are a product of the way humans organize and act on their social world.”²¹ Both challenged theories that were “individualistic and reductionist”, seeing these as “obscuring the true nature of the problem and justifying a lack of political action.”²² Furthermore, they attacked a “liberal view of disease” which sees poverty and illness as the product of the weaknesses and inabilities of the poor themselves. They criticized Social Darwinism which looks at disease as “natural and inevitable, eventually eliminating the weaker races and thus improving the human species.”²³

Marx’s critique of the philosophical and socio-economic theories of his predecessors (i.e., the idealist philosophy of Hegel and Feuerbach, the classical political economy of Smith and Ricardo, the positivist philosophy

of individuals... which adversely affects their health... It is an account [on health] based on social organization rather than the individual or biology.” Kevin White, preface to *An Introduction to the Sociology of Health and Illness* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 79.

¹⁹ Rose Weitz, Preface to *The Sociology of Health: A Critical Approach*, 4th edition (CA: Thomson Wadsworth: 2007), xvii.

²⁰ Fran Collyer, “Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Capitalism, Health, and the Healthcare Industry,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Theory in Health, Illness and Medicine* ed. Fran Collyer (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 47.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 48

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

of Auguste Comte, and especially the utopian socialists of his time) resulted to a critique of a school of sociology which he labeled as “an illusory activity of illusory subjects...”²⁴ He criticized a type of sociology that postulates “society” as “an abstraction confronting the individual.”²⁵ Instead, Marx proposed a “materialist conception of history” which he summarized as follows:

I was led by my studies to the conclusion that legal relations, as well as forms of State, could neither be understood by themselves, nor explained by the so-called general progress of the human mind, but that they are rooted in the material conditions of life... The general conclusion at which I arrived and which, once reached, continued to serve as the guiding thread of my studies, may be formulated briefly as follows: In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society—the real foundation, on which legal and political superstructures arise and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness.²⁶

²⁴ Karl Marx, “German Ideology.” *Karl Marx: Selected Writings in Sociology & Social Philosophy*, newly translated by T. B. Bottomore. Edited, with an introduction and notes, by T. B. Bottomore and Maximilien Rubel, and with a foreword by Erich Fromm (NY: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1964), 71.

²⁵ Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts.” In Bottomore and Maximilien Rubel, 77.

²⁶ Marx, Preface to “The Materialist Conception of History” in Bottomore and Maximilien Rubel, 51.

A materialist analysis of disease and health seeks to understand health inequality in its inner contradictions and will try to resolve it using revolutionary practice through the mass movement.

Sociology of health is an attempt to raise awareness that more than just a person to be diagnosed and treated by medical professionals, the patient is first and foremost a social being.²⁷ Or, as Marx explicitly pointed out: “Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand.”²⁸ Hence, it looks at illness and disease and the entire health care system as “a social phenomenon, with social roots and social consequences.”²⁹ It is to acknowledge the “profoundly social character of illness and medicine” which means that “health can never be absolutely reduced to biological science.”³⁰ Sociologists study health and illness primarily because they help us understand how society works and also the experience of sickness and disease is an outcome of the organization of society.³¹

Various topics have been explored and discussed in the field of sociology of health. For instance, scholars have

²⁷ David Wainwright, preface to *A Sociology of Health*, ed. David Wainwright. (Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore: Sage Publications: 2008), ix.

²⁸ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, in <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch05.htm> (accessed 26 June 2020).

²⁹ Rose Weitz, *The Sociology of Health: A Critical Approach*, 4th edition. (CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), 1.

³⁰ *Ibid*, xi.

³¹ Kevin White, 1.

examined the social impacts of gender,³² race,³³ religion,³⁴ and socioeconomic inequalities³⁵ on health. This study specifically focuses on health inequality. Health inequality, in the context of this study will use a human-rights-based approach that defines health inequality as “potentially avoidable differences in health that adversely affect socially disadvantaged groups, and, more specifically, groups that have experienced discrimination or social exclusion.”³⁶ Most existing literature on the sociology of health had their theoretical grounding on Marx and Engels. This research augments the existing body of literature by using Vladimir Lenin’s analysis of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism. Lenin’s extensive discussion on finance capital can help us understand how the commodification of the health system in the country works. Specifically, this research crystallizes how neoliberal socio-economic forces further aggravate the deteriorating health services in the

³² Renee R. Anspach, “Gender and Health Care,” in *Handbook of Medical Sociology 6th Edition*, ed. Chloe E. Bird, Peter Conrad, Allen M. Fremont and Stefan Timmermans (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2010), 229-243; See also Patricia P. Rieker, Chloe E. Bird, and Martha E. Lang, “Understanding Gender and Health”, 52-68.

³³ See David T. Takeuchi, “Race, Social Contexts, and Health: Examining Geographic Spaces and Places,” in *Handbook of Medical Sociology 6th Edition*, 92-102.

³⁴ Wendy Cadge, “Religion, Spirituality, Health, and Medicine: Sociological Intersections,” in *Handbook of Medical Sociology 6th Edition*, 341-353.

³⁵ Bruce Link, “Social Conditions as Fundamental Causes of Health Inequalities,” in *Handbook of Medical Sociology 6th Edition*, 3-16.

³⁶ Paula Braveman, “Health Difference, Disparity, Inequality, or Inequity—What Difference Does it Make What We Call It?,” in *Understanding Health Inequalities and Justice: New Conversations Across the Disciplines*, ed. Mara Buchbinder, Michele Rivkin-Fish, and Rebecca L. Walker (The University of North Carolina Press: 2016), 34.

country. Using a “sociological perspective”, this paper frames the present health crisis as a *public issue* rather than simply looking at it as a merely *personal trouble*.³⁷ It criticizes what Charles Andrain calls a “dominant fatalist, reactionary, hierarchical, and individualist world-views”³⁸ on health. Health inequality inevitably becomes an ethical problem inasmuch as it enters the question of social justice and human rights. For this reason, health differences are *unfair* inasmuch as “they put an already socially disadvantaged group at further disadvantage with respect to health, and health is needed to escape social disadvantage.”³⁹ However, health inequalities can be prevented or mitigated through proper interventions by the State (ex: pro-poor government health programs and policies) with the help from civil society groups and NGOs. Since health is needed for a full functioning in every sphere of life, i.e., health is crucial for well-being, longevity, and economic and other social opportunities, then health inequality is also a *moral issue* which needs urgent action. Moreover, a critical sociology of health is also an “analysis of power” since it inevitably studies the impact of political forces that utilizes tyranny and dictatorial rule in addressing a health problem. As Weitz elaborates:

Because sociologists study groups rather than individuals, the sociological analysis of power focuses on why some social groups have more power than others, how groups use their power, and the consequences of differential access to power (i.e., some have more than others), rather than on how specific individuals get or use power.⁴⁰

³⁷ Weitz, 6.

³⁸ Charles F. Andrain, *Policies and Social Inequality*. (London: MacMillan Press Ltd.: 1998), 113.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Weitz, 8.

The right to health is a cardinal and social-economic right. It is enshrined both in international laws such as the United Nations⁴¹ and World Health Organization⁴² and in our 1987 Constitution.⁴³ The Preamble of the Constitution of the World Health Organization signed in 1946 defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”⁴⁴ With the signing of Republic Act 11222 or the Universal Health Care Act by President Duterte, the government promises “a new dawn for health care” by prescribing complementary reforms in the health system. Dubbed as a “critical step towards health for all Filipinos”, the law will supposedly ensure citizens’ “access to the full continuum of health services they need, while protecting them from enduring financial hardships as a result.”⁴⁵ Sad to say, what is masterfully crafted on paper is not translated into actual and concrete practice. A quick look at our present health care situation reveals the following morbid conditions:⁴⁶

⁴¹ UN Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25.

⁴² See World Health Organization. “Constitution of the World Health Organization” [https://www.who.int/bulletin/archives/80\(12\)981.pdf](https://www.who.int/bulletin/archives/80(12)981.pdf) (accessed 24 March 2020).

⁴³ 1987 Constitution, Article II, Section 15. See 1987 Philippine Constitution, available in <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/constitutions/the-1987-constitution-of-the-republic-of-the-philippines/the-1987-constitution-of-the-republic-of-the-philippines-article-ii/> (accessed 24 March 2020).

⁴⁴ World Health Organization. “Constitution of the World Health Organization” [https://www.who.int/bulletin/archives/80\(12\)981.pdf](https://www.who.int/bulletin/archives/80(12)981.pdf) (accessed 24 March 2020).

⁴⁵ World Health Organization, “UHC Act in the Philippines: a new dawn for health care” (March 14, 2019) <https://www.who.int/philippines/news/feature-stories/detail/uhc-act-in-the-philippines-a-new-dawn-for-health-care> (accessed 24 March 2020).

⁴⁶ Jose Lorenzo Lim, “Covid-19 and the Philippine healthcare system” *IBON*. March 20, 2020 <https://www.ibon.org/covid-19-and-the-philippine-healthcare-system/?fbclid=IwAR08MOaL4YxTE16K>

1. As of 2017, there are 1,236 hospitals in the country, of which 65% are privately-owned
2. WHO recommends 20 beds per 10,000 population. The Philippines has 14.4 beds per 10,000 population in 1990 to only 9.9 beds per population 10,000 in 2014
3. Only 47% of barangays had barangay health centers in 2018
4. The ratio of government physicians is 1: 33,0000 Filipinos. WHO recommended 1: 1,000. In 2016, DOH said the country needed at least 15,000 doctors to meet the healthcare needs of Filipinos each year
5. The number of public health nurses is 1 to 50,000 Filipinos. One reason for the lack of nurses is we have been exporting nurses for decades because wages are low for healthcare professionals in the Philippines. For example, the Philippines deployed 19,551 nurses or 53 nurses per day in 2016
6. The overall share of health care in the national budget decreased from 4.9% in 2019 to 4.5% in 2020. For example, the budget for Epidemiology and Surveillance Program which monitors, investigates, and analyzes disease outbreaks was cut by more than half, reduced from Php262.9 million in 2019 to Php115.5 million in 2020
7. The budget for Health Systems Strengthening Program, the program used for ensuring a wide range of human health resources such as doctors, nurses, midwives, community health workers, and other health care providers was also cut by Php6 billion in 2020

In the Philippines, “6 out of 10 patients die without ever seeing a doctor.” This means that every year, one million patients are driven to poverty “because of catastrophic health expenses.”⁴⁷ Recent researches show

eb1OjyQd6LXX6Y-7wWfEDkEtGqe8MyfLrJ20Cnf2zQo (accessed 25 March 2020).

⁴⁷ Ronnie E. Baticulon, “The Philippine healthcare system was never ready for a pandemic.” March 20, 2020

socioeconomic factors tend to enhance health inequalities, citing poverty as undoubtedly one of the important causes of preventable death⁴⁸ and still the leading cause of death and illness in the country.⁴⁹ There is also a higher burden of morbidity and early mortality in poor communities than those living in affluent areas.⁵⁰ A myriad of “social determinants of health” are affecting the Filipino people such as unemployment, landlessness and land grabbing, skyrocketing prices of basic commodities, geographic remoteness, environmental plunder and degradation, vulnerability to disasters and social exclusion.⁵¹ Underdevelopment and economic backwardness are also seen as indicators of a poor public health system. Semi-colonial and semi-feudal society is determined by foreign domination, feudal oppression, and elitist politics.⁵² The Philippines’ backwardness and

<https://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/2020/3/20/healthcare-pandemic-opinion.html> (accessed 22 March 2020).

⁴⁸ Brian Oldenburg, “Public Health as a Social Science,” *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 12543. doi:10.1016/b0-08-043076-7/03782-7; See also Steven H. Woolf, MD, MPH, Robert E. Johnson, PhD and Jack Geiger, MD, MS. “The Rising Prevalence of Severe Poverty in America: A Growing Threat to Public Health,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 31/4 (2006): 334. doi:10.1016/j.amepre.2006.06.022; On how to measure “health poverty” and its application to specific cases, see Clarke, P., Erreygers, G., “Defining and measuring health poverty,” *Social Science & Medicine* 244 (January 2020): 5-21 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.112633>.

⁴⁹ IBON Foundation, Inc, *Chronically Ill: An overview of the Philippine health sector* (Quezon City: IBON Books, 2008), 2.

⁵⁰ Greig Inglis, Fiona McHardy, Edward Sosu, John McAteer, Hannah Biggs, “Health inequality implications from a qualitative study of experiences of poverty stigma in Scotland,” *Social Science & Medicine* 232 (2019): 43-49. doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.04.033.

⁵¹ Seiji Yamada, MD, MPH, “The Health of the Filipino People under the Duterte Administration,” *Social Medicine* 10/2 (August 2016): 73.

⁵² Amado Guerrero, *Philippine Society and Revolution 6th Edition* (Institute for Nationalist Studies, 2014), 63.

underdevelopment is worsened by decades of adherence to neoliberal “free market” policies. This is further aggravated by the country’s subservience to economic policies that treat health services as commodities to be sold to the market, thus depriving millions of poor access to healthcare.⁵³ Neoliberalism as a market ideology geared towards the accumulation of super-profits for big corporations is characterized by budget cuts on basic social services such as health, education, housing, etc. Quality and affordable health services have become inaccessible to the poor because of the triad neoliberal anti-health economic reforms: privatization, deregulation, and liberalization.⁵⁴ McGregor explains the adverse effects of neoliberal privatization and commodification of health care on citizens:

...neoliberalists believe that social solidarity (gained through a welfare state) should be replaced with a concern for competition, accountability, and consumer demand in the marketplace. The social citizen should be replaced with the *consumer citizen*. Instead of the state providing health care, consumers are expected to *purchase* it in the marketplace (privatization). Instead of being collectively entitled to health care because one is a citizen of a nation-state, neoliberalists assume that only *those who can afford to buy health care can have it...* They [neoliberalists] arrange for the public care system to become so inaccessible, undependable, and inefficient that people feel they are making a good

⁵³ Dikaio Sakellariou and Elena S. Rotarou, “The effects of neoliberal policies on access to healthcare for people with disabilities.” *International Journal for Equity in Health* 16/199 (2017): 5-8.

⁵⁴ For an in-depth discussion on the impact of deregulation, privatization and budget cuts on health, see Milton Terris, “The Neoliberal Triad of Anti-Health Reforms: Government Budget Cutting, Deregulation, and Privatization,” *Journal of Public Health Policy* 20/2 (1999): 149-167.

consumer choice by *buying* services in the marketplace.⁵⁵ (emphasis mine)

In mid-May, the government announced that “it will leave it up to the discretion of private businesses to conduct tests for COVID-19” since it has “no program in place to carry out mass detection.”⁵⁶ The Institute for Occupational Health and Safety Development (IOHSAD) earlier warned that privatizing mass testing for COVID-19 could be a “recipe for disaster” that could undermine workers’ health and lack of employers’ and government accountability.⁵⁷ In the final analysis, the “real winners” of neoliberal healthcare reforms are transnational companies and other foreign corporations that make huge profits out of health services.⁵⁸

A materialist evidence for the causes of our worsening and deteriorating health care system reveals that it is largely rooted in the social organization rather than individual or biology. Marxian inspired sociologists focus on the production of health through the formation of a capitalist, healthcare *industry*.⁵⁹ The neoliberal, market-oriented, and profit-driven healthcare system is evidence that the Philippines' healthcare system is an outcome of the organization of society. This atomized and

⁵⁵ Sue McGregor, “Neoliberalism and health care,” *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 25/2 (June 2001): 87.

⁵⁶ Darryl John Esguerra, “Gov't says it's up to the private sector to conduct mass tests for COVID-19” (May 18, 2020) <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1276892/amid-limited-covid-19-testing-capacity-govt-to-let-private-sector-conduct-mass-testing> (accessed 26 June 2020).

⁵⁷ Gabriel Pabico Lalu, “Gov't reliance on the private sector for mass testing a recipe for disaster—Group.” (May 20, 2020) <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1278366/govts-reliance-on-private-sector-for-mass-testing-a-recipe-for-disaster-group> (accessed 26 June 2020).

⁵⁸ Sakellariou and Rotarou, 4.

⁵⁹ Collyer, 49.

individualist healthcare system pushes individuals to become more dependent on the medical-industrial complex run by profit-hungry capitalists. It is clear that the lives of millions of Filipinos have been adversely affected by economic and political programming that favors market interests, specifically privatization of social and public services like health care. Hence, a dysfunctional system of healthcare delivery is but a symptom of a decadent and regressive economic system that treats services as commodities and puts profit over people.

In a class society, the ruling class has the monopoly of good, quality healthcare. They can afford to pay exorbitant professional fees of medical specialists and can stay in luxurious hospital rooms. In times of health emergencies and pandemics, they get first-class treatment and immediate and unhampered access to testing kits. Asymptomatic politicians and their relatives can easily avail of COVID-19 testing kits while poor and ailing patients wait for available stocks in government hospitals.⁶⁰ Many die while waiting for their test results. In a class society, the poor are locked in slum areas guarded by heavily armed military personnel during community quarantine while privileged politicians (a Senator and a Congressman) shamelessly violate DOH quarantine protocols with impunity. Health experts are

⁶⁰ In a report by GMA News, the Philippines lags behind its neighbors in Southeast Asia in terms of the number of COVID-19 tests conducted. Data from DOH showed the Philippines has so far conducted 2,147 tests as of March 26, 2020. This is way behind the tests conducted by other ASEAN countries. For example, Vietnam has so far conducted 30,548 tests, Singapore 39,000 tests, Malaysia 21,885 tests. See detailed report in Ted Cordero, "Philippines lags behind Southeast Asian peers in COVID-19 tests done," GMA News (March 26, 2020) <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/731441/phl-lags-behind-southeast-asian-peers-in-covid-19-tests-done/story/> (accessed 27 March 2020).

now worried that hundreds of people may be exposed to the virus because of their reckless and irresponsible actions.⁶¹ When three COVID-19 patients are “sent home due to lack of space in health facilities”⁶², health inequality becomes a problem of morality. Andrain is correct in pointing out how capitalism generates alienation among the working class: “Economic inequalities, class exploitation, unsafe working conditions, dilapidated overcrowded housing, and material deprivation generate alienation from the capitalist system.”⁶³ Hence, the need to critically evaluate our health care system through the prism of Catholic social teaching.

Catholic Social Teaching on Healthcare

Charity is at the heart of Catholic Social Teaching, as Reichert argued: “one cannot ignore the present, immediate needs of the impoverished in the hope of building a just society.”⁶⁴ Charity is intrinsically linked with justice, for to love others requires that “I must first be just towards them.”⁶⁵ The antithesis or negation of

⁶¹ Inday Espina-Varona, “In the Philippines, sick lawmakers skirt quarantine as cops threaten to shoot ‘lockdown’ violators,” (March 26, 2020) <https://www.licas.news/2020/03/26/in-the-philippines-sick-lawmakers-skirt-quarantine-as-cops-threaten-to-shoot-lockdown-violators/> (accessed 27 March 2020).

⁶² ABS-CBN News, “3 Covid-19 patients in QC sent home due to lack of space in health facilities: mayor,” (March 22, 2020) <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/03/22/20/3-covid-19-patients-in-qc-sent-home-due-to-lack-of-space-in-health-facilities-mayor> (accessed 26 March 2020).

⁶³ Andrain, 134.

⁶⁴ Elizabeth Reichert, “Charity: The Heart of Catholic Social Teaching,” *Handbook of Catholic Social Teaching: A Guide for Christians in the World today* ed. Martin Schlag with a foreword by Peter K.A. Cardinal Turkson (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 4.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

charity is injustice, social exclusion, and marginalization. Michael Horsnby-Smith correctly identified the four dimensions of social exclusion:⁶⁶

1. Impoverishment or exclusion from adequate income or resources;
2. Labor market exclusion from paid employment;
3. Service exclusion, for example from education, health and welfare services; and
4. Exclusion from social relationships, including full participation in political processes and decision-making

All four are inimical to a Catholic view of health care. Without adequate income, the poor does not have access to quality health care. Market exclusion will result in exclusion from adequate income and exclusion of the poor from full participation in the political process (ex. policy-making) will eventually exclude them from social services.

A holistic approach to the health of a human person entails integrating spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional and social dimensions. Studies on the role of the church in promoting health and caring abound.⁶⁷ A growing number of churches and lay communities offering health ministry includes faith-based hospitals, community nursing, lay health promoters, clinics, and integrating faith-based health education materials in their curriculum.⁶⁸ Catholic social teaching on health

⁶⁶ Michael P. Horsnby-Smith, *An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 208.

⁶⁷ See Michael Long, "The Church's Role in Health and Wholeness," *Health Communication* 16/1 (2004): 129-30. doi:10.1207/S15327027HC1601_9; Mary Chase-Ziolek, PhD, "(Re) Claiming the Church's Role in Promoting Health: A Practical Framework" *Journal of Christian Nursing* 32/2 (2015): 101-107. doi:10.1097/CNJ.0000000000000153.

⁶⁸ Ziolek, 101, 104.

care is founded on four essential elements: a) the sanctity of life and the inviolable dignity of the human person created in the image and likeness of God; b) the biblical foundations for the Church's ministries of health, healing, and wholeness; c) social justice and the common good; d) part of the Church's mission.⁶⁹ As Christians, we need to "*respond* to the need of our neighbors-basic needs such as food, shelter, *health care*, education... [and] seek the best ways to *respond* to these needs."⁷⁰ A Catholic vision of health care promotes

...[a] healthcare system... rooted in values that respect human dignity, protect human life, respect the principle of subsidiarity, and meet the needs of the poor and uninsured, especially the unborn children, pregnant women, immigrants, and other vulnerable populations.⁷¹

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI affirmed this vision:

It is necessary to work with greater commitment at all levels to ensure that the right to health care is *rendered effective*... to establish a real distributive justice which, on the basis of objective needs, *guarantees adequate care to all*.⁷² (emphasis mine)

⁶⁹ See Bishop Robert F. Vasa, "A consideration of social justice," *The Linacre Quarterly* 83/4 (2016): 363, 365. For an exposition on the dialectical relationship between justice and healthcare, see James McTavish, "Justice and healthcare: When 'ordinary' is extraordinary," *The Linacre Quarterly* 83/1 (2016): 26-34. DOI:10.1080/00243639.2015.1123891.

⁷⁰ United States Conference of the Catholic Bishops (USCCB), "Forming consciences for faithful citizenship," <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizens/forming-consciences-for-faithful-citizenship-title.cfm>, quoted in Donald P. Condit, "Catholic social teachings: Precepts for healthcare reform," *The Linacre Quarterly* 83/4 (2016): 370-347. DOI: 10.1080/00243639.2016.1247621.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Benedict XVI. "Message to participants in the 25th international

Sibley situates healthcare within the ambit of distributive justice.⁷³ Denouncing what he refers to as a problematic “market knows best theory” of healthcare, Sibley commented:

In the healthcare sector, the market 'knows' the demand for various treatments, but demand in the economic sense simply means the ability and willingness to pay. It does not necessarily reflect patients' needs. The market, in itself, does not 'know' about those needs. It only knows how much patients are able and willing to pay for various treatments. So a market-based healthcare system often fails to deliver the distributive justice the Catholic teaching demands.⁷⁴

Pope Francis has likewise consistently reminded the faithful of the importance of bringing quality healthcare especially to the poor and the vulnerable in society. The Pope's close encounter with the poor, the oppressed and exploited members of society not only enabled him to see their concrete situation but allowed him to see reality from their perspective. Thus, the Pope correctly pointed out that the poor are victims of socio-economic and political structures that not only victimizes them but also excludes them. The Catholic church's “long history of service to the sick” includes “shielding Catholic hospitals from the business mentality that is seeking worldwide to

conference organized by the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers,” November 15 https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20101115_op-sanitari.html, quoted in Angus Sibley, “Health care's ills: A Catholic diagnosis,” *The Linacre Quarterly* 83/4 (2016): 402. DOI: 10.1080/00243639.2016.1249264.

⁷³ Sibley, 403.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 410.

turn health care into a profit-making enterprise, which ends up discarding the poor.”⁷⁵

Pope Francis denounced those socio-economic structures that oppress and exploit the poor and deprive workers of just wages. The poor that are victimized by these unjust structures “cry out to God for vengeance”. Extreme poverty and unjust economic structures were “violations of human rights” which called for solutions for justice.⁷⁶ Amid injustice and oppression, the poor needed justice, not charity.⁷⁷ Speaking in front of Finance Ministers from various nations, he reminded them we are now living at a time “when profits and losses seem to be more highly valued than lives and deaths, and when a company’s net worth is given precedence over the infinite worth of our human family.” He appealed to them to “act prudently and responsibly” and promote human dignity by freeing themselves from “the idolatry of money that creates so much suffering.”⁷⁸ On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights on December 10, 2018, he pointed out “numerous forms of injustice” that continue to trample on the political, economic, and civil rights of the poor. These “grave injustices” are often “fueled by an economic model founded on profit, which doesn’t hesitate to exploit, to

⁷⁵ Pope Francis, “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Twenty-Sixth World Day of the Sick 2018,” November 26, 2017, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/sick/documents/papa-francesco_20171126_giornata-malato.html (accessed 21 March 2020).

⁷⁶ Pau Vallely, *Pope Francis: Untying the Knots* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 195.

⁷⁷ Robert Blair Kaiser, *Inside the Jesuits: How Pope Francis is Changing the Church and the World* (NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 115.

⁷⁸ Pope Francis, “Address to Finance Ministers from Various Nations,” May 27, 2019 http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/may/documents/papa-francesco_20190527_climate-change.html (accessed 21 March 2020).

reject and even to kill man.”⁷⁹ He added that a “reductive vision of the human person” brought about by “modern forms of ideological colonization by the stronger and wealthier” is detrimental to the poorer and most vulnerable members of society.⁸⁰

The pope also strongly denounced the “growing inequality in health care” due to the State’s abandonment of duty to protect and provide adequate health services.⁸¹ The pope also emphasizes “serving, the poor, the infirm, the suffering, the outcast and the marginalized” as a fundamental part of the Church’s mission. For this reason, he gives full recognition and appreciation to frontliners in the healthcare ministry for their life of self-giving, generosity, and solidarity and encouraged them to continue addressing the challenges of present-day healthcare.⁸² Some of the powerful metaphors Francis used to convey his vision of genuine healthcare⁸³ are: “go

⁷⁹ Francis, “Message to Participants in the International Conference. Human Rights in the Contemporary World: Achievements, Omissions and Negations,” December 10, 2018 <https://zenit.org/articles/popes-appeal-human-rights-must-be-at-center-do-not-fear-going-against-the-grain/> (accessed 21 March 2020)

⁸⁰ Francis, “Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps,” January 8, 2018 http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/january/documents/papa-francesco_20180108_corpo-diplomatico.html (accessed 21 March 2020).

⁸¹ Francis, “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Participants in the European Regional Meeting of the World Medical Association,” 7 November 2017 http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20171107_messaggio-monspaglia.html (accessed 21 March 2020).

⁸² Francis, “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Twenty-Fifth World Day of the Sick 2017,” December 8, 2016 http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/sick/documents/papa-francesco_20161208_giornata-malato.html (accessed 21 March 2020).

⁸³ Cathleen Kaveny, “Pope Francis and Catholic Healthcare Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 80/1 (2019): 186-201.

to the peripheries!” and a critique of “throwaway culture vs. a culture of encounter”.⁸⁴

Pope Francis is also consistent in condemning what he calls “mentality of profit” in the field of health services. He reminded Catholic healthcare institutions not to “fall into the trap of simply running a business” but instead focus on “personal care more than profit.”⁸⁵ In his message to the 2020 World Day of Sick, he provided a structural analysis on the root cause of the marginalization of the poor and the sick and criticized what he calls “oppressive social system” that “neglects social justice out of a preoccupation for financial concerns.”⁸⁶ “Market’ or “competition” ideology for health, according to Charlene Harrington “supports rationing care to those who can pay for it.”⁸⁷ The present Philippine health care system basically reflects this kind of market-driven, profit-oriented, and competition-enhanced health care. This approach to health care inevitably leads to physical death especially among the poor. The Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez puts it succinctly:

When a people is not taken into account, when a people is despised in one way or another, then in a certain

⁸⁴ Ibid., 195-200.

⁸⁵ Francis, “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the XXVII World Day of the Sick 2019,” November 25, 2018 http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/sick/documents/papa-francesco_20181125_giornata-malato.html (accessed 21 March 2020).

⁸⁶ Francis, “Message of his Holiness Pope Francis for the XXVIII World Day of the Sick 2020.” January 3, 2020 http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/sick/documents/papa-francesco_20200103_giornata-malato.html (accessed 21 March 2020).

⁸⁷ Charlene Harrington, “Market Ideology in Health Care and the Catholic Church,” *Medical Anthropological Quarterly* 10/1 (March 1996): 25.

sense the persons who belong to that people are also being killed... Poverty, therefore, means death!”⁸⁸

In a society that follows a market-driven and profit-oriented mantra, the “poor”, then, are “non-persons”, and as such, “*in-significant*”. Gutierrez continues:

...those who do not count in society and all too often in Christian churches as well... *someone who has to wait a week at the door or the hospital to see a doctor*. A poor person is someone without social or economic weight, who is robbed by unjust laws; someone who has no way of speaking up or acting to change the situation.⁸⁹ (emphasis mine)

The everyday life, then of the poor amid COVID-19 pandemic is death. A privatized, commodified, corporatized, and commercialized health care system that systematically discards the poor is not only anti-poor but also unchristian. Glueck is correct in pointing out that “health”, “holiness”, and “wholeness” are “holistically equivalent”.⁹⁰

Amid this pandemic, the poor are asserting their right to health and demanding adequate health services. Calls for #FreeMassTestingNow, #MassTestingNowPH, #NoVIPTesting, and #SolusyongMedikalHindiMilitar are mounting among community-based health advocates, activists and individuals who are frustrated by the slow response of the government in providing COVID-19 test in communities. Online calls to #SecureOurHealth

⁸⁸ Gustavo Gutierrez, *Gustavo Gutierrez: Essential Writings* ed. with an introduction by James B. Nickoloff (Makati: St. Paul Publications, 2004), 144.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Nathan Glueck, “Religion and Health: A Theological Reflection,” *Journal of Religion and Health*, 27/2, (Summer 1988): 109-10.

Workers are also building up amid inadequate masks, protective personal equipment, alcohols, and disinfectants in hospitals. In areas where government economic relief is not felt, grassroots communities, urban poor sectors, women, church-people, and members of the academe organize “bayanihan” systems where they distribute relief packs to poor families. Meanwhile, cause-oriented groups, human rights advocates, NGO's and people's organizations remain vigilant of the looming human rights violations amid community lockdowns and the granting of "emergency powers" to the President. They are organizing online forums and discussions to push for #MassTesting and immediate economic relief, especially in poor communities. They are demanding an end to VIP testing and insisted #FullProtectionOf Frontliners. Student councils call for the abolition of online classes highlighting the fact that not all students have access to the internet. Mass movement remains the most effective antidote to government ineptness and apathy amid the health crisis.

Conclusion

This paper presented the plight of the poor, especially the working class and those living in depressed (slum) areas during COVID-19 pandemic. Their already precarious living is worsened by the health crisis and aggravated by the government's incompetence in handling the situation. The State's militaristic approach to the health problem provides no immediate health solutions nor did it provide swift economic relief. On the contrary, it only resulted to gross violations of people's civil, political, and economic rights.

A materialist analysis of the present health care system was presented that points to the systemic, organizational, structural, political, economic, and social

forces behind the deteriorating health system. Neoliberal economic policies such as privatization, deregulation, and liberalization which puts profits over people are seen as the root-causes of this man-made epidemic. Poverty and economic misery are worse than the virus. It plagues the poor on a daily basis affecting their entire family.

The Catholic church's social teaching on health is a rich and profound material that faith-based communities can utilize to have a deeper and clearer grasp of socio-political and economic forces affecting society. It can also be a tool for Christians to examine, scrutinize, and challenge existing dominant health care systems anchored on the neoliberal economic paradigm that disregards human beings in the pursuit of profit. The present health care crisis is worsened by decades of adherence to neoliberal policies of privatization, deregulation, denationalization, and liberalization. Combining theory and praxis, contemplation, and action, the Church (bishops, priests, religious, and laypersons) are challenged to be evangelized by the poor, to learn from them, and to link arms with them as they continue the struggle to build a more just and humane society.

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Life and Churchlife During Pandemic: Bioethical Issues and Church Response in the Time of COVID-19

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Abstract: The first part of this paper attempts to expose hospital-care situations vis-à-vis ethical principles and pastoral care. In other words, actual scenarios are subjected to the three ethico-pastoral angles of the current pandemic, namely: (a) the crucial process of consultation and decision-making on account of the scarcity of treatment and facility; (b) the role (or non-role) of a religious minister to persons *in periculo mortis*, albeit when the seeming cause of death is highly contagious as COVID-19; and (c) the search to discover for the formula to prevent and cure this treacherous disease. The second part is a narrative of the ways that the institutional Church of Palawan (Apostolic Vicariate of Puerto Princesa) has responded to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19 • Bioethics • Death • Dying • Informed Consent • Moral Discernment • Clinical-Pastoral Care • Vaccine and Cure • Pastoral Leadership • Social Action Apostolate

Introduction

Health crisis such as COVID-19 is all about life. How to stay alive, actually. Considered as an “invisible enemy,” COVID-19 is unprecedented threat to human life. With no treatment available yet on the horizon, cases of infection and death continues to spike. Beyond health, collateral to the crisis are people’s livelihood, social and

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mental well-being, government system, cultural milieu, and so on. In this web of concerns due to the pandemic, it is pertinent to look into specific burning issues, such as, bioethical issues and issues facing the Catholic Church in this challenging times, particularly, on the end-of-life dilemma of decision-making and the pastoral initiatives of a local church, namely, the Apostolic Vicariate of Puerto Princesa (AVPP) in Palawan, respectively.

The first part attempts to expose hospital-care situations vis-à-vis ethical principles and pastoral care. On the other hand, the second portion is mainly a narrative. Via social communications, we are able to document some pastoral initiatives of the local church which could also be seen as indicative of making concrete our social teachings.

Dying in Isolation

Death is seen as isolation. In common theological understanding, it is the separation of body and soul. In the physical world, it is about the departure from the earth toward heaven. For any mortal, it is the passing away or parting of a loved one. All these descriptions of the end of life naturally brings extreme sadness. But how about dying by your lonesome? It is sad enough to die, it would be unbearable to die in isolation. For some, and in many places, on account of fear of contagion of the COVID-19, to die necessarily requires immediate cremation.¹ Ergo, those who grieve are not given time to mourn for their loss. On the other hand, cremation² is relatively pricey, and is not yet widely practiced (or accepted) in the Philippines. Who would foot the bill? In

¹ <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/03/25/20/philippines-releases-funeral-guidelines-for-covid-19-fatalities> (accessed 10 April 2020).

² Catholic Church allows cremation. Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), # 2299-2301.

this time of the COVID-19 pandemic, to die is not only sad; it is thoroughly cruel.

A report in the East Avenue Medical Center in Quezon City (Philippines) of several unclaimed dead bodies piled up (littered) along the hallway is not only cruel but more so it is deplorable.³ According to Dr. Dennis Ordoña, the spokesperson for the said hospital, the piled up corpse happened because “the hospital did not have sufficient equipment, such as freezers, to store additional human remains.” He also added that that relatives are hesitant to claim the corpse of their beloved departed for fear of transmission of the COVID-19 to them, let alone another concern which is the monetary charge when they claim the cadaver.

At this pressure time, it is exceptionally important to arrive at a sound moral, legal, and socially acceptable decision. It goes without saying that anybody involved, especially in this kind of decision-making, would not want to be accused of being negligent, professionally incompetent and morally unjust. Certainly, all stakeholders (families of the patient, the attending medical professionals, public health authorities, pastoral-spiritual care-providers, etc.) would want to decide and to deliver services accordingly. Thereupon, bioethics, as a practical discipline, must not only ask stimulating ethical questions but it should likewise provide clear and concrete medical advice, morally viable options and within the bounds of what is legal to the families and to the medical frontliners alike.

This section of the article will attempt to reflect on the three ethico-pastoral angles of the current pandemic, namely: (a) the crucial process of consultation and decision-making on account of the scarcity of treatment

³ <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/04/11/20/doh-east-avenue-medical-center-deny-covid-19-deaths-not-being-reported-vow-probe> (accessed, April 13, 2020)

and facility; (b) the role (or non-role) of a religious minister to persons *in periculo mortis*, albeit when the seeming cause of death is highly contagious as COVID-19; and (c) the search to discover for the formula to prevent and cure this treacherous disease.

When To Give Up and What to Give Up

Due to the paranoia brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become quite common to jump hastily into a conclusion that somebody who has died of respiratory failure has succumbed to the said virus. In fact, even if the primary cause of death was unrelated to the respiratory system, it is almost always probed toward and around the wretched COVID-19 virus; it is as if every kind of clinical death now is attributed to it. Possibly, it could be said that somebody died of COVID-19, or that somebody has died during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Be that as it may, dying must also be seen as a process. In the eyes of faith, it is called as spiritual journey. Along the way, toward the end-of-life, what bioethical steps are worth pondering and be acted upon? First of all, treatment must be made available, safe and efficient. As to the availability (or scarcity) of treatments or apparatuses, decisions must be based on impartiality, transparency, equitability, and fairness. All things being considered, Christian charity calls for a spirit of sacrifice, even to the point of a supreme one. Our thoughts go to St. Maximilian Kolbe, who was then in prison in Auschwitz. He volunteered to be executed to take the place of a man with a family.⁴ Recently, an Italian priest, who died of COVID-19 gave his ventilator in favor a of younger

⁴ https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=370 (accessed 11 April 2020).

COVID-19 patient.⁵

Meanwhile, in the field of medical care, an ethical dilemma could arise on the use of ventilator and the same on patients – up to what extent in time will it be utilized or at what point in time should it be discontinued? Can a patient, too, have a right to refuse a treatment?

Especially in the end-of-life case, questions usually arise on medical interventions in view of whether the said interventions would be morally obligatory or merely optional. In other words, it is imperative to distinguish the ordinary over the extraordinary interventions.⁶ Ethically speaking, there is what we call as the proportionate (ordinary) measure against the disproportionate (extraordinary) one. Proportionate measure obliges in so far as it is “grounded on objective state of affairs regarding both the concrete clinical condition of the patient and the present state of the medical art.”⁷ On the contrary, what is disproportionate is judged as not morally binding. When everything medical has already been exhausted and all factors have likewise been considered (risks involved, the necessary expenses and the prognosis), thereupon, the signal should indicate that it is time to “pull the plug” or to simply give up.

Moreover, there is a recent bizarre call of a DNR order (Do Not Resuscitate) by some hospitals on COVID-19 patients, this could be due to the fact that many health facilities have their concern on “the shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) and exposure to fluids that could endanger the health and lives of the doctors, nurses

⁵ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/italian-priest-coronavirus-ventilator-don-giuseppe-berardelli/> (accessed 11 April 2020).

⁶ Cf. CCC, # 2278.

⁷ Cf. Taboada, P., <https://hospicecare.com/policy-and-ethics/ethical-issues/essays-and-articles-on-ethics-in-palliative-care/the-ethics-of-foregoing-treatment-at-the-end-of-life/> (accessed 17 April 2020).

and others involved in the resuscitation. Concerns include not only losing healthcare personnel who could become ill but also the amount of PPE needed for each attempt.”⁸ Whether this is ethically sound or not depends significantly on the principle of informed consent on the part of the patient, along with the relatives, lawyers, spiritual adviser, among others. If and when the patient him/herself opt for the DNR, thereupon, those involved in the medical side must prudently consider it as an order. In the event that the patient is already incapacitated to decide, a legal proxy must be appointed (usually, an immediate family member). In such circumstance, it is always wise, especially for the elderly and with those comorbid illnesses to provide advance directive so as to unburden everybody of the so-called “guilt” and from further distress of finger-pointing. Caution must be observed, however, so as not to make DNR a universal policy or a blanket order for every case or patient. In the name of justice, informed consent⁹ is the bedrock to moral-bioethical judgment. Needless to say, any measure whatsoever should never be coerced from persons, especially toward the sick, and even more to a dying person.

Finally, a Spanish quote captures well our duty of care to patients, “*Si puedes curar, cura. Si no puedes curar, alivia. Si no puedes aliviar, consuela. O mejor:*

⁸ Cf. Plunkett, AJ, <https://www.psqh.com/news/covid-19-hospitals-should-consider-cop-carefully-before-deciding-on-dnr-policy/> (accessed 17 April 2020).

⁹ “Free and informed consent requires that the person or the person's surrogate receive all reasonable information about the essential nature of the proposed treatment and its benefits; its risks, side-effects, consequences, and cost; and any reasonable and morally legitimate alternatives, including no treatment at all.” Cf. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services # 27*, November 17, 2009.

consuela siempre, reza una máxima médica,” which can be understood as: If it can be cured, cure. If it cannot be cured, relieve. If it cannot be relieved, comfort. Or better yet, comfort all the time and pray for what is best. Or simply, prayer is the best medicine; and God as the Divine Healer and Miracle Worker.

No One Must Die Alone

As a priest who would normally administer the last rite to a dying patient, I can vouch that it is not uncommon that a person who is at the point of death would request to be surrounded by people who love them. It eases the pain for everybody in the room to be present in time of death, both for the patient and for those who care for them. At this time of pandemic though, dying with the presence of loved ones is deemed irresponsible and careless, if not criminal. The circumstance is called for on account of the protection of everyone so as to stem the transmission of the virus. In other words, to visit the sick or to attend to the dying at this time, which is actually called for by Christian charity, must now be dealt with ethical considerations.

Even a religious minister is likewise in a dilemma (and even scared). How will we minister now with COVID-19 patients? Are we allowed yet? How is physical distancing apply on the bedside clinical-spiritual caregiving? Must we wear a PPE over our clerical vestments? Will ministering to the sick by way of technology (videocalling) be already permitted?

The World Health Organization (WHO), recognizes the vital role every religious minister in saving lives and in reducing illness related to this pandemic.¹⁰ The WHO

¹⁰ Cf. World Health Organization, “Practical Considerations and Recommendations for Religious Leaders and Faith-based Communities in the Context of COVID-19, April 7, 2020.

maintains that religion and faith are a primary source of support, comfort, guidance and direct health care and social service for the communities they serve. Ministers are able to provide pastoral and spiritual care especially in this time of public health crisis and can advocate for other needs for the sake of their communities and the whole society in general.

Conversely, the Catholic Church, while recognizing the restrictions of quarantine protocol and the present difficulties (including scare) in making rounds for hospital visits, is never clamped to be creative in ministering to sick people. In the mind of one bishop (Bishop Giovanni Nerbini of Prato)¹¹ in Italy, in a letter to his priests said, “You are called to a ministry in some ways similar to that of doctors, nurses and psychologists. The people turn to you with trust and hope, seeking help or even just a word of support, of accompaniment.” Furthermore, he reminded priests on this time of crisis that they should be like good shepherds, who when confronted by wolves “is not afraid and does not run away... but defends his flock.”

Moreover, Bishop Nerbini gave a permission to a group of doctors attending to COVID-19 patients to distribute Holy Communion. According to the prelate, the said idea was inspired by Pope Francis himself who called on the doctors and medical professionals "to play the role of intermediaries of the church for people who are suffering." This pastoral creativity paid off in the experience of the medical staff themselves. “I realized that in the fight against coronavirus, our effort is too focused on fighting the physical ills of the patients... They are lonely, suffering people, not only in body but also in soul,” shared by a doctor. Meanwhile, for patients who

¹¹ <https://www.ncronline.org/news/quick-reads/bishop-allows-doctors-give-communion-coronavirus-patients> (accessed 28 April 2020).

were on respirators and unable to physically receive the Eucharist, the doctors read a prayer at their bedside.

Finally (pun intended), how will a religious minister attend or perform ritual to the dead infected with COVID-19? Unfortunately, social distancing and quarantine protocol still prevail. According to the WHO, corpse of coronavirus victims are generally not infectious.¹² But just the same, as this health authority advises, relatives are not to touch nor to kiss the body of the victims as a precaution to prevent the transmission of the virus. As such, funeral rite is left with only two “unacceptable” choices, namely: a cremation or a mass burial in a mass grave. Needless to say, coronavirus virtually dispatches faith’s way of mourning and comforting the afflicted and even praying for the dead.

Baptisms and weddings had already been cancelled, but obviously, not the funeral. Grieving cannot be postponed. The more it is delayed, the more it turns out to be painful. All things being considered on protocol, prayers and Holy Masses are still being offered for every soul’s repose. Bereaved families would send a note though, “When all this is over, I will gather my family and loved ones, please Father, say Mass for us and our beloved departed.”

In Search for a Cure or Waiting for a Miracle

Though there seems to be a slowing down of infection and decline on the death toll in Italy, Spain, and Iran, the extension of the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) or lockdown in the Philippines might take awhile, which is a prognosis of someone who is an ‘insider’. This is based on the common timetable in research tests for a cure or

¹² <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/04/07/828317535/coronavirus-is-changing-the-rituals-of-death-for-many-religions> (accessed 28 April 2020).

vaccine, which on a fast-track case would take 12-18 months,¹³ and anything earlier than this frame is a miracle. It seems that we need to couple the search for a cure with prayer to fast-track our combat against COVID-19.

With the COVID-19 presenting unpredictable behavior, many medical scientists and research laboratories are scrambling for immediate cure, though it remains provisional. Some cures afloat from natural food, such as banana,¹⁴ ginger,¹⁵ virgin coconut oil (currently running tests on selected COVID-19 positive patients in the Philippines)¹⁶ to drugs available in the market made to treat specific diseases, such as Hydroxychloroquine and Chloroquine (a drug for malaria), lopinavir and Ritonavir (treatment for HIV), Remdesivir (cure for Ebola), Favipiravir (anti-flu).¹⁷ However, these medicines are still under investigation. Trials should not be done privately by individuals just

¹³ A vaccine for Covid-19 will not be ready until the end of next year, according to Dale Fisher, chair of the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/04/a-coronavirus-vaccine-wont-be-ready-until-the-end-of-2021-professor-says.html> (accessed 5 May 2020).

¹⁴ Banana and other fruits, for that matter, can improve immune system, but there is no proof that it can cure COVID-19. Accessed, April 30, 2020, <https://www.msn.com/en-ph/health/health-news/bananas-no-cure-for-covid-19-%E2%80%93-doctor/ar-BB11fVz2?li=BB8YXP>.

¹⁵ It does have a positive impact, but it is neither a cure for COVID-19. <https://newseu.cgtn.com/news/2020-04-03/Enjoy-ginger-but-it-s-not-a-cure-for-COVID-19-says-WHO--Pn0Wuje3UA/index.html> (accessed 30 April 2020).

¹⁶ It is considered to be on the research pipeline as a possible vaccine or cure. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1253072/dost-to-study-virgin-coconut-oil-as-cure-for-covid-19> (accessed 30 April 2020).

¹⁷ All these drugs or treatments remain in contention for scientific approval. <https://www.livescience.com/coronavirus-covid-19-treatments.html> (accessed 30 April 2020).

simply because it was recommended by somebody, like a president.¹⁸ There was even a report of fatality due to misuse (overdose) of one of the trial drugs. This is a proof that when cautiousness is not being considered to one's health, medicine is swallowed up as a poison instead. With this foregoing, it is the moral duty of every medical practitioner to advise against the use of unproven drug, much less injurious or fatal.

Time is of the essence, and every minute is precious in finding a cure. There were some talks about accelerating to manufacture the medicine, yet at what cost and at whose expense? An old adage could serve as a reminder and warning: "Haste makes waste." To ascertain the viability of a cure, there must be clinical tests that are considered ethical. In a clinical drug trial involving human subjects or participants basic ethical protocols must be in place, such as well well-informed participants on the aimed benefits and possible side-effects and risks, the consent of participants (when they have already been selected), proper remuneration to participants. In this regard, bioethics informs the medical scientists involved in research for a cure or vaccine that they must weigh the potential threats to health and human life vis-à-vis the safeguards of its benefits. All these should be in accordance with the objectives and parameters of the total well-being not just of a person but of the global community in general. The function of bioethics is to ensure that medicines and other related treatments and corollaries should be safe, effective, affordable and must be able to meet real medical indications. Anything contrary and lacking in the criteria must be deemed questionable, if not utterly unjust, hence immoral. Associated with this, (bio)ethics

¹⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-fda-hydroxychloroq/u-s-fda-warns-against-malaria-drugs-trump-championed-for-covid-19-idUSKCN226275> (accessed 30 April 2020).

does not end in clinical test, but this extends to the moral responsibility on the part of pharmaceuticals. Will the cure or vaccine be affordable or will this create a ‘drug divide’?

On March 27, 2020, the Society of Medical Physicists in the Republic of the Philippines (SMPRP) issued a statement regarding the proposal on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) on the CT-Scan data of individual patients to diagnose COVID-19, which is called ‘Huawei Cloud NPC-CT AI-Assisted Quantitative Diagnosis Service’.¹⁹ According to the association’s board of trustees, though the said technology seems to post some promises and potentials, they have nonetheless been careful in endorsing the device for the following five reasons, (1) radiation exposure, (2) accuracy and appropriateness of the AI to the Philippines population, (3) infection prevention and control, (4) cost, and (5) data privacy and bylaws. In addition, they reminded fellow physicians to be prudent in accepting and using new technologies that could compromise the total welfare (both physical and privacy) of patients, which this device seems to present. Evidently, prudence is the ground of every ethico-moral discernment.

With a fertile imagination, let us say that there is a cure yet made available to the public? What if there are successes in drug experimentations, without approval from the authorities? It is categorically unethical and unprofessionally when in a health crisis situation someone or some business interest is at play and taking place over humanitarian reason. Surely, there could be nothing more preposterous than being uncharitable during crisis time. Without fail, compassion and charity must be sovereign in every single ethical undertaking.

For the time being, while the world still awaits for

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=584279738827981&set=pcb.584280415494580> (accessed 1 May 2020).

that right kind of cure, everyone is strictly advised to help “flatten the curve” through preventive measures. And for those infected, proper care must be given to them to relieve symptoms until they have recovered. For the moment, while waiting for a cure and vaccine, let us intensify our resolve to pray for a miracle. However, while the majority of the population is waiting for a cure and equip treatment, others seem to operate on privileges.

In Poverty, We Share: A Church Response To Pandemic: AVPP Experience

With the transition from ECQ to GCQ since May 1, Palawan is practically back to a normalcy that is referred to as the “new normal.” People are back on the streets. Noises and honks from vehicles signal movements of goods. Businesses do struggle to make their presence felt, everything has been reopened, except our churches. Temporarily, may it be.

Looking back at nearly 2 months of a lockdown, it could not be said that the church has been closed all along. While it has indeed been quarantined in terms of usual gatherings, it has also found creative ways in making the faith alive, and even livelier through reaching out in the midst of crisis. There is that popular internet graphic which claims that the devil had already won the battle against goodness because all churches had been closed down. On the contrary, as has been countered, every home was in fact transformed into many churches making God as the eventual and real winner in toppling the devil. To extend the contention even farther, it was not only that homes were transformed in churches, even the homeless among us have had a Church as a home.

In this time of crisis, how does a church become truly

a church, that is being truly a people of God? How are spiritual graces dispensed while the physical structure of the church is clamped? How do we discharge our mission in shepherding? The new normal is about working from home, can we also say the same with pastors? In a particular manner, how did AVPP, as a local church, respond to the crisis? Considered as a mission territory yet within the church, what made AVPP extend help and launched outreach initiatives? Moreover, in what ways did AVPP collaborate with local government units in a manner helpful and valuable for the common good? Finally, with the post-COVID 19 era and in the “new normal,” how and what will a church be in a provincial setting? What must the pressing call be for a local church that is already poor and is even now turned cash-strapped by the pandemic?

Shepherding in the Time of Crisis (The Bishop’s Role During Pandemic)

To be a shepherd is a calling for everybody. But the honor (and the burden) rightfully belongs to the bishop of a given juridical territory. This is made symbolically obvious by the staff he carries in a liturgical function. Under him are priests who only share in his shepherdhood. Bishop Socrates Mesionera is the shepherd figure and person for the Apostolic Vicariate of Puerto Princesa.

Early on, with the pronouncements from the national government on the imminent pandemic, Bishop Mesionera has already been communicating periodically to his priests. Unfortunately, at the onset of earlier advisories, he was on an official pastoral visit in the parish in Sicud (municipality of Rizal), the farthest ecclesiastical territory in West Coast. Due to weak communication signal from that farflung parish, relay of instructions to

priests, especially on Mass gatherings, came in either late or nil. The lamentable experience of unfavorable signals and the urgency of the crisis prompted the bishop to call for an emergency meeting of all priests in March 16, 2020.

The agenda of the said meeting were, (1) the assessment from the ground, (2) recommendations, and (3) instructions by way of a pastoral letter as a collective response to the community lockdown. The fruit of the meeting (pastoral letter) was actually forward-looking since the declaration of lockdown was yet confined within the National Capital Region (NCR). The marching voice of the shepherd Mesiona then was “just in case” -- “just in case this will happen, we will follow this one . . . in case it will not happen, we will go for this action.” In general, the pastoral letter contained directives, both for the spiritual well-being as well as for public health considerations. But the letter did not see the light for another day, right after the meeting was adjourned, a lockdown was declared in the whole of Luzon, including Palawan. One in the just-in-case scenarios was immediately implemented -- cancel all mass gatherings (included religious gatherings) until further notice.

In the intervening time, Bishop Mesiona did transmit a blow-by-blow updates on current situations with corresponding instructions. For example, Bishop Mesiona echoed the invitation of Pope Francis to all Christian leaders for simultaneous praying of the “Lord’s Prayer” last March 25, 2020, the Solemnity of the Annunciation. Likewise, he also encouraged everyone to participate in an extraordinary Urbi et Orbi last March 27, 2020. He himself did wake up to livestream the spiritually-charged event at 1’o clock in the morning (PH time). For the Holy Week celebrations, Bishop Mesiona issued liturgical guidelines based on the instructions and updates in view of the pandemic provided by the Vatican.

Notably, Chrism Mass, a rite where priests are gathered around the bishop for renewal of vows, was postponed up until the time being. And for his Easter message to priests, he said, “Let us reach out to people and make them feel that we, as their pastors, are one with them in their journey. Let us provide them hope in the midst of this crisis. Let the victory of the Risen Christ cheer up their weary spirit.” Moreover, other than all these formalities in church-life, Bishop Mesiona went practical as well by reminding the priests to be resourcefully hygienic. Said he, “*in case wala na kayong rubbing alcohol, you can try this as an alternative: 4 cups of water, 2 tbsp of baking soda, 1 cup of white vinegar, 3-5 kalamansi or 1 big lemon. Mix them slowly... Mix them well!*” The holy hands of priests must also be healthy hands.

Likewise, Bishop Mesiona sees to it that the sheep are not only guided spiritually but are taken cared of with temporal what-haves. In other words, corporal works of mercy, as commanded by the Lord himself, must also be accomplished as integral to the mission of the Church, much more in the time of unimaginable crisis as this one. The bishop reflected on the question, “What is the Church doing?” Instead of feeling nagged, Mesiona took it in a stride as to consider such question as a challenge to further it pastoral creativity in charitable initiatives and to disturb complacency within the sheepfold. He even vouched for the Church that serves in a rather quiet way, in the forefront of challenges devoid of fanfare. To walk the talk, and on his own anonymous initiative at that, he cooked and prepared foodpacks for frontliners, prayed over police personnel, visited patients and healthcare providers in the hospital, led various relief operations and have been raising substantial funds for outreach programs and for other social action concerns. Needless to mention, but always the most important though,

Bishop Mesiona pounds on the power of prayer as the motor of every what the church is doing. He contends, “it is our spiritual services that give people the inner strength not to succumb to hopelessness when confronted with desperate situation.”

Quite literally, it is in challenging times that a leader is on one’s mettle. There could be bumps, as there should always be, along the road from crisis to relief, from recovery to the “new normal.” All told, it is rather crucial that at this trying moment of history, the voice of the shepherd finds reasonable balance between the spiritual needs of their flocks and the legitimate demands of public health concerns. “In our own way, little or big it may be, let us continue to do good to our people,” relayed by Bishop Mesiona in one of his texts to his priests.

The Church in the Time of Need (AVPP Social Action Initiatives During Pandemic)

If there is one clear silver lining that the pandemic is bringing about for the Catholic Church is its magnanimous conveyance of a message of having expertise in humanitarian causes, namely the social action/apostolate. It has been made obvious that it is neither about meddling in politics nor encroachment on the affairs of the state. That is what we call as collaboration. Why would the Church extend beyond the confines of spiritual sphere? Because the Church does not neglect, and must never neglect the cries of the needy; because the Church cannot afford to ignore the anxieties of peoples; because the Church must always speak against injustices and in matters called by human conscience. In other words, very much like Jesus, the Church must also tend to the real concerns of real people in their real world. As Jesus was, so will the Church be, all the time.

The proverbial “cancel all Masses” signify as well to a halt to all other actions of the Church. The ministries in liturgy and spirituality, education and formation, conventions and youth camps, team-buildings and retreats, etc. were all called off. On the other hand, it could be said that in times of this unprecedented crisis, the mission in social action has taken the centerstage, albeit not in the spotlight of worldly standards. The office of Social Action is explicitly tasked to promote and to carry out the Church's principles towards humanitarian causes. Inspired and mandated by Catholic Social Teachings, this component in the Church is most tenacious in advocating for and attending to the needs of the poor and the marginalized.

In AVPP, how was the social action administered since ECQ up to GCQ then to MGCQ and back again to GCQ?

Early on, Fr. Jasper Lahan, the Director of Social Action Center (SAC), had to set up first collaboration pipelines with counterpart agencies in the local government. This must always be the prior recourse to any social initiatives. During this lockdown, Bishop Mesiona would relay instructions in deference to state authorities, in his words, “I strongly recommend that you coordinate closely with the LGU and DOH in your area for further guidance.” In countless concerns, Fr. Jasper has to maintain signals with the IATF-EID (Inter Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Disease) in the city and provincial levels. As a matter of fact, the said task-force would also open invitations for the Social Action to attend in their meetings.

On the specifics, the Social Action Center (as of May 1, 2020) has distributed relief foodpacks to more than 5,300 families, as well as 688 faceshields, 438 facemasks and snacks to our local frontliners. Also, this charitable arm of the AVPP has also mobilized and organized relief

operations for fire victims in Brgy. Bagong Silang, PPC. According to Fr. Lahan, support came from SAC benefactors and some private groups. It is also worth noting that assistance were made possible through linkages with other church-based entities, namely: Pondo ng Pinoy, Caritas Manila, AVPP Chancery Office and ICCP Kalinga ni Maria.

Meanwhile, there are similar initiatives on the parish level were similarly accomplished such as in *St. Therese of the Child Jesus Parish* in Aborlan that conceptualized a mobile market that enabled to bridge fisherfolk-parishioners to sell their catch to townfolks. Likewise, in *St. Isidore Parish*, Maruyugon, instead of the usual banquet for the patronal fiesta, they opted to distribute foodpacks to some 250 parishioners. For the duration of ECQ, the *Seminario de San Jose* played a Good Samaritan has welcomed strangers, where they housed and attended to the needs of several stranded tourists from the NCR. In a rather quieter way, our brethren belonging to the indigenous groups were also accorded attention by way of visiting them in their dwelling places on the mountains and sharing with them foodpacks. This kind of initiative was made possible by the nuns of the Augustinian Missionaries of the Philippines in Brooke's Point and the Immaculate Conception Parish in Quezon. On the other hand, ICCP managed to provide free ride to marketgoers at the time when the transportation was hampered.

It must go without saying that the above-mentioned are just but a few of the many efforts and responses made in the name of solidarity with peoples, especially with the suffering. Though the AVPP is classified as a poor area on an ecclesiastic level, nevertheless, this was never an excuse not to extend a compassionate hand to others. In the words of Bishop Mesiona to priests, "Our funds may not be sufficient for everybody's needs but let us allow

God's mercy and the people's generosity to abound at this time of crisis... while our Commission on Social Action is tasked to be in the frontline, I am appealing to you to reach out to the needy within your parish in your own loving way." (3-24-2020)

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has surely affected our lives in all its aspects—from physical to spiritual. This paper offered a bioethical and pastoral response to the challenges the virus presents before us. From the bioethical dimension, I laid down ways to reach a sound moral decision-making that is called for from the patient or from loved ones in case the patient is incapacitated or in coma. The patient must be well informed on the assurance and possible outcome of a treatment. This is a challenging time for medical professionals who daily put their lives on the line. Many Filipino nurses and doctors, here in the Philippines as well as those abroad, who were infected and died due to this virus, shows the unpreparedness of most if not all governments all over the world in combating this pandemic. This is a hard lesson we must all learn from.

From the ecclesial response, the Catholic Church has showed creativity in addressing the need of the people, in particular at the AVPP. From the parishes down to individuals, response was not limited in providing food packs during the lockdown but also providing shelter to stranded local tourists (Palawan is one of the many tourist spots in the Philippines). The church also turned digital as it uses social networks not only to air Eucharistic celebration but also ways to coordinate actions with parish organizations. This pandemic has shown us what we lack and what we can do, those who have none and those who share. It indeed showed the

worse and the best in humanity. Let this be the last pandemic that humanity will face, only when we learn from what nature has showed us.

Developments and Challenges in the Use and Interpretation of Scripture in the Study and Teaching of Christian Moral Life

Edwin B. Odulio ♦

Abstract: This paper deals with three different stages/periods in the progressively evolving use and interpretation of the Judeo-Christian Scripture in moral theology. The first stage refers to some moral theologians' gradual move away from the rigid and juridical nature of the manuals-based moral theology toward an emphasis on the grounding of the Christian moral life in the person of Jesus. The second stage shows the need to adopt various Biblical interpretative approaches because making Jesus as the norm and source of inspiration in doing moral theology necessitates a better approach to the study of Scripture. In making the meaning of Scriptural accounts relevant to the changing context of people, moral theologians further moved to the third stage wherein human experience, through various secular disciplines, is paid a better respect for its autonomy and taken to serve scriptural interpretations for today. Thus, theologians also gained better theological insights with their use of the secular sciences to critically understand various moral issues including those that were historically non-existent in the Scripture. Such developments thereby brought valuable challenges to the ways the Christian moral life is taught in religious education courses.

Keywords: Christian moral life • Interpretation of Scripture • Human experience • Renewal in moral theology • Religious education

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Introduction

Before Vatican II, the manuals or textbooks used in moral theology were the authoritative sources in understanding the Catholic Christian moral life. These manuals were designed to prepare seminarians for the penitents' confessions. These were also used as bases in the teaching of Christian moral life.¹ The use of the manuals made moral theology uninspiring and apparently ineffective because it transformed the Christian moral life into a rule-based practice which focused on the evaluation of sin and application of moral laws.² The practice became very rigid and departed from a moral life understood as an imitation of the life of Jesus. It eventually led toward calls for change and renewal to address this juridical way of moral instruction.³

The renewal in moral theology characterized a way of teaching the Christian moral life that is more inspiring and effective through the use and study of Scripture. Vatican II's *Optatam Totius* (Decree on Priestly Formation), insists that moral theology's "scientific exposition, [must be] nourished more on the teaching of the Bible."⁴ The careful study of human actions and decisions in moral theology must be grounded richly in the study of

¹ See Todd A. Salzman, *What Are They Saying About Catholic Ethical Method?* (New York: Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2003), 3.

² See Vitaliano R. Gorospe, "Moral Theology After Vatican II," *Philippine Studies* vol. 15/3 (July 1967): 439.

³ See, James Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (New York: Continuum, 2010); John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (London: Clarendon, 1987).

⁴ Austin Flannery, ed., "Decree on the Training of Priests: *Optatam Totius*," in *The Basic Sixteen Documents Vatican II Constitutions Decrees Declarations*, para. 16 (Dublin, Ireland: Dominican Publications, 1996).

the written word of God. This is because as the soul of sacred theology, the Scripture provides the specific Christian character of moral theology and it is also the primary source which can shed light on the calling of the faithful in Christ to bear fruit in charity for the life of the world.⁵

Over the years, there have been key efforts in the task of nourishing the teaching of Christian moral life with Scripture. These endeavors affect not its place in moral theology but also in religious education. Religious education is a discipline that presents the Christian faith in the school setting.⁶ It teaches the Christian moral life to help students become more critical in understanding the faith as they strive to become committed followers of Jesus.

The following discussion will lay out a summary of developments in nourishing moral theology with the use and interpretation of Scripture. This will be followed by a presentation of the developments' implications for the teaching of Christian moral life in religious education.

The grounding stage: Rooting moral theology in the Scripture

One of the significant and probably the most influential responses to Vatican II's call for a scripturally enriched moral theology was the publication of Bernard Häring's *The Law of Christ*. This three-volume work was released around the period of the Second Vatican Council gathering. In this work, Häring grounds Christian moral living in the person of Jesus who has been under-emphasized in the manuals-based moral theology. Häring deviated from the sin and law-oriented approach

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (Pasay City, Philippines: Paulines Publishing House, 1998), para. 71.

of the pre-Vatican II moral theology which primarily focused on the observance of rules and moral obligations deduced from what was then considered as natural law. His moral theology focused on the study and understanding of the meaning of the life and teachings of Jesus who provides the ultimate foundation and inspiration of moral living. He insists that the norm, center, and goal of Christian moral theology is Christ. “The law of the Christian is Christ Himself in person. He alone is our Lord, our Savior. In Him we have life and therefore also the law of our life.”⁷ Häring would later on release a new work with a title that greatly departs from the “Law...”: *Free and Faithful in Christ*.⁸ A similar work around the “Law...” period was Rudolf Schnackenburg’s book, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament*. Like Häring, Schnackenburg argues Jesus’ centrality in the study and teaching of Christian moral life. He emphasized that the Christian moral life is the human beings’ response to the saving word and work of God in Jesus Christ.⁹ Both Häring and Schnackenburg grounded their moral theological study in light of Jesus’ good news of the Reign of God.

The recognition of Jesus’ centrality in the teaching of Christian moral life, in effect, emphasized the significance of the Scripture in moral theology. Scripture accounts, especially those that contain the Jesus events, were read and studied in developing Christian moral teachings. This is different from the manuals-based moral theology which only used scripture texts to support

⁷ Bernard Häring, *The Law of Christ: Moral Theology for Priests and Laity, Volume I: General Moral Theology*, trans. Edwin G. Kaiser (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1961), vii.

⁸ Bernard Häring *Free and Faithful in Christ 3 Vols.* (New York, Seabury Press, 1978-1981).

⁹ See Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament* (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1965), 13–53.

the moral teachings that were already established through philosophical insights, reason/natural law. In his later work, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, Häring noted that it is “an unfortunate custom to refer to Scripture only after having presented one’s own system, and to do so particularly in order to present proof-texts for the norms already established once and forever.”¹⁰ Through the study of scripture texts, the Christian moral life is presented as a response to God’s compassionate love and calling. God’s divine love and calling is seen and understood throughout the Scripture’s stories, teachings, prayers and other contents but most especially and definitively in the life and teachings of Jesus who inspires and calls people, “Come, follow me.” The Scripture-based moral theology has led moral theologians to recognize more seriously the central place of the written word of God as the primary source of the Church’s moral teachings.

The renewal stage: The use of biblical interpretative approaches

The grounding of moral theology in Scripture necessitates a renewal in the way moral theology is taught. Biblical interpretative approaches, which were not given much attention in the pre-Vatican II moral theology began to be used in developing Christian moral teachings. Some biblical interpretative approaches are worth citing.

The *historical-critical approach*. This approach takes as its starting point the view that scripture texts must be understood in their original historical context. It claims that God could have hidden in the words of the human

¹⁰ Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ: Moral Theology for Clergy and Laity*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), 7.

authors a message which remains concealed to the human author but which would be discovered at a later time.¹¹ This message is used as a source in identifying moral precepts that give direction to human actions. In this approach, theologians develop their moral teachings from the meaning that comes from the Scripture's human authors, the world in which they lived, and the contexts that formed and influenced their writing. The historical-critical approach is helpful in dealing with the problematic use of Scripture where scripture texts are merely quoted and used as proof texts. Bieringer and Pollefeyt mention that this practice can be seen in citing "isolated verses in support of our own views ("Does not the Bible say that?")."¹² The historical-critical approach, which uses a variety of methods such as textual, literal, source and form criticism helps the reader and interpreter of the Scripture to discover the original meaning of the sacred texts and prevents them from simply using these texts to defend or prove their own personal moral opinions.

The *narrative approach*. Other theologians focus on the use of biblical narratives in the teaching of Christian moral life.¹³ Moral theologians who use this approach recognize the Scripture's capacity to communicate God's

¹¹ See "*Sensus Plenior*" in Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" (1993); https://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC_Interp-FullText.htm (accessed 12 May 2020).

¹² See Didier Pollefeyt and Reimund Bieringer, "Risks and Challenges in Teaching the Bible," in *Normativity of the Future: Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in An Eschatological Perspective*, eds. Reimund Bieringer and Mary Elsbernd (Leuven: Paris: Walpole: Peeters, 2010), 380.

¹³ See for example, Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982); Norbert Rigali, "The Story of Christian Morality," *Chicago Studies* 27/2 (1998): 173-80; William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1999).

word through God's deeds presented in narrative accounts. They use scripture stories, plots and characters from both the Old and New Testaments in inspiring people to answer God's loving call in Jesus Christ who summons people to repent and believe in the Gospel. The use of the narrative approach brings the relational dimension of Christian morality because of the capacity of scripture stories to evoke personal and interpersonal response to God who reveals oneself in the daily and ordinary events and experiences in people's lives. Scripture stories also provide key insights on the kind of people that God calls to live the values and virtues they need to develop in order to grow in their loving relationship with God and one another. It departs from the legal approach and looks at Biblical stories as sources of inspiration, instruction, vision, etc.

The *socio-historical approach*. In the attempt to draw out the values and virtues that people need to develop to respond to God's call for a loving relationship, other moral theologians use social, historical, and sociological investigations on the scripture texts. They try to examine how the early Christian community received the word of God as manifested in the kind of attitudes they lived out. This approach can be seen, for example, in the work of Lisa Sowle Cahill in her study on the virtues and practices of the early Christian communities that were formed through the preaching of Paul.¹⁴ Cahill's work advocates that the early Christian community's values and virtues must be recognized as the authoritative norm in the concrete living out of the meaning and message of the written word of God.

The use of the aforementioned scripture interpret-

¹⁴ See Lisa Sowle Cahill, "The Bible and Christian Moral Precepts," in *Christian Ethics: Problems and Prospects*, ed. Lisa Sowle Cahill and James Childress (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1996), 3–17.

ative approaches has helped moral theologians in moving forward from the rigid and legalistic moral theology that is based on the manuals. Christian moral life is now presented as a response to God through committing themselves in Jesus. However, the said approaches are not without limitations.

The use of the historical-critical approach has the tendency to be fixed on the original meaning of the scripture texts and use this as the timeless moral guide for Christians. It must be noted that people in the biblical times and the community who wrote the scripture texts addressed faith and life issues from their particular and unique contexts. Imposing the original message of the texts to the faith and life of people today can be problematic because there are certain moral decisions and practices in the biblical times, such as slavery and the customary discriminatory treatment of women, which today are considered as dehumanizing and oppressive to people.

The drawback in the narrative approach is its limitation in scripture texts that are in the story-form. This approach is not effective in dealing with the equally rich source of moral wisdom in other literary forms of the Scripture such as prayers, epistles, and exhortations. Many of the Scripture narratives also contain experiences that could be unfamiliar or not easy to be understood by people coming from different contexts. For example, people who do not raise crops may not appreciate the depth of meaning of scripture narratives that tell stories about farming or those who work for human rights would not appreciate immediately why Abraham, who almost killed his son, is hailed as the father of faith.

The difficulty in the use of the socio-historical approach is similar with that of the historical-critical approach. Not all values and practices of the early

Christians can be imposed on the life of people today. For example, accentuating the hierarchy between women and men that is practiced by the early Christians in Corinth (1Cor 1:3) cannot be an obligatory pattern for the life of Christians today who are already living in a different context.

One of the root causes of the said problems is the nature of the Scripture as an ancient text. The Scripture was written a long time ago and many of its stories, experiences, teachings, values and other contents are already “miles away” from the actual life and experiences of people today. There is a widening gap between the historical contexts of Scripture and today’s contemporary contexts. This is a problem that is challenging to the moral theologians in their work of using the Scripture in dealing with contemporary moral issues. Many of the moral concerns that must be tackled by moral theology today are unprecedented or absent in the Scriptures. This concern led to a new stage in the study and interpretation of the Scripture in moral theology.

The progressive stage: The Scripture in light of human experiences and the secular sciences

Even if there is a widening gap between the Scripture’s historical context and the changing life of people today, contemporary theologians exhibit that scripture texts can still acquire new meanings that is relevant to the current life and concerns of people. This is because while the definitive revelation of God has already happened in the life and teachings of Jesus, this revelation is by no means finished. The Christian believers continue to grow in their understanding of the meaning of the Scripture texts. The following discussion presents how theologians elicit new and relevant insights from the scripture texts.

The sensitivity to contemporary human experience. Moral theologians start to start from the concrete day-to-day human experiences especially of those who suffer from poverty, marginalization, social inequality, gender discrimination and other forms of violence.¹⁵ These human experiences are taken into account in drawing out Christian moral teachings from the Scripture. Moral theologians who focus on feminist and liberation theology, for example, use this approach in reflecting on the message of scripture texts for today.

Take, for example, how Elizabeth Johnson uses the oppressive experiences of women in reading Lk 13:10-13.¹⁶ In this text, Jesus healed a crippled woman while he was teaching in one of the synagogues on a Sabbath day. Johnson stated that like the woman in the story who was already suffering for eighteen years, women in the world today shoulder many burdens, suffer abuses and yet are being neglected by many people even inside the church. Jesus' act of noticing the crippled woman, stopping mid-stream during his teaching, and attending to the woman show a scripture meaning that reveals "Jesus' love for women, his concern for their well-being, and his freeing act on their life."¹⁷ This attentive love of Jesus for the crippled woman in the scripture narrative has a normative claim in the life of Jesus' followers today. It invites them to protect and be mindful of the life of women especially to those who are oppressed and

¹⁵ The attention to human experience was exemplified in a 2015 meeting of moral theologians from Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia and America in Padua, Italy. They discussed how to do theological ethics in view of the different concerns and experiences of people from different places. See James Keenan, ed., *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church*, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2008).

¹⁶ Elizabeth Johnson, "Jesus and Women: "You Are Set Free"," in *Catholic Women Speak. Bringing Our Gifts to the Table*, ed. Catholic Women Speak Network (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015), 19–22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

marginalized. The women's experiences that Johnson brings into the reading of the Scripture shed further light on polysemic nature of the written word of God. This inchoate multiple meaning of the Scripture bridges the gap between the historical contexts of the Scripture and the contemporary life and moral concerns of present believers. It enables people to see that while the Scripture is an ancient text, the written word of God continuous to be relevant as it is life-giving in their struggle to understand and practice their Christian faith today.

Reading the Scripture in the light of human experiences is helpful in the interpretation of Christian moral teachings. The integration of human experiences in the interpretation of the Scripture makes the art and science of interpretation more grounded and philosophically tenable.¹⁸ Thus, the message of the scripture texts are more life-affirming especially for the neglected and oppressed because human life, its joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties, is taken into account.¹⁹ It also highlights and promotes the communitarian aspect of Christian faith which leads people to become inclusive and attentive especially to the suffering and marginalized.

The respect bestowed upon the autonomy of the secular sciences along with the interpretation of Scripture. Together with the sensitivity to human experiences in the interpretation of the Scripture, a growing number of

¹⁸ The theory of interpretation (hermeneutics) could verify this statement; see Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Garrett Barden and John Cumming (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975; and Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas University Press, 1976).

¹⁹ Austin Flannery, ed., "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium et Spes," in *The Basic Sixteen Documents Vatican II: Constitutions Decrees Declarations* (Dublin, Ireland: Dominican Publications, 1996), para. 1.

theologians have paid attention to the valuable insights that are provided by the different secular sciences. These sciences are “listened to and heard” along with the interpretation of Scripture to examine and reflect on the complexity of moral issues. Take, for example, the need to discuss the necessary Christian response to the Covid-19 pandemic that the world is currently facing. The use of Scripture alone is insufficient in understanding the socio-political, medical, cultural, and other relevant dimensions of this problem that have important bearing on the life and Christian decisions of people today. This is because most of these dimensions have not been dealt with or even understood yet by the biblical people and the communities who have written the Scripture. Many theologians demonstrate that a more relevant and holistic approach in dealing with the current world situations and issues entail the use of secular sciences such as anthropology,²⁰ environmental science,²¹ biology²² and other scientific disciplines. It can be seen that the Pope himself has integrated valuable insights from sociology and ecology in his discussion on the environmental problems that pleads for concrete and immediate Christian moral responses.²³

Nevertheless, the use of human sciences along with

²⁰ See, for example, Reynaldo D. Raluto, “The Anthropocentric Perspective of Western Christianity,” in *Poverty and Ecology at the Crossroad* (Quezon City, Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015), 40–44.

²¹ See, for example, Anne Marie Dalton and Henry C. Simmons, “Science and Ecology,” in *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), 71–88.

²² See, for example, Ferdinand D. Dagmang, “Amplifying *Laudato Si’* With the Science of Epigenetics,” *MST Review* 21/2 (2019): 1–20.

²³ Francis, “What Is Happening to Our Common Home,” in *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), paras. 16-71, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papafrancesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html.

Scripture in teaching Christian morality has not been warmly received by everyone. There is a concern that the use of insights from secular sciences would bring moral theology outside the Church's tradition which, along with Scripture, provides the foundational source of Christian moral life.²⁴ This concern claims that the use of secular sciences would make moral theology not sufficiently theological anymore.²⁵ Some others also see "social and human sciences... as having alternative views on human life that were incompatible with theological perspectives."²⁶

The use of secular sciences does not mean turning moral theology into a secular discipline that neglects meaningful theological reflection. The formation of the Christian faith remains the paramount task of moral theologians but teaching the faith necessarily entails the openness to the sciences which can help Christians to see that their faith does come from and have bearing on the ground. The understanding and living out of the faith in Jesus is never separated and must be necessarily grounded on the everyday, physical, mundane realities of human life which can be studied and analyzed within the domain of the secular sciences. A good example on how the teaching of Christian moral life is Scripturally-grounded but at the same time enhanced by the wisdom of secular sciences can be seen in the Catholic social

²⁴ See Tom Elits, "Has Moral Theology Left Catholic Tradition Behind?," *America: The Jesuit Review*, February 8, 2019, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/02/08/has-moral-theology-left-catholic-tradition-behind>.

²⁵ See Charles C. Camosy, "The Crisis of Catholic Moral Theology," *Church Life Journal*, November 15, 2018, <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-crisis-of-catholic-moral-theology/>.

²⁶ Philip Hughes, "Alternative Facts' and the Tensions Between the Social Sciences and Theology," *Pointers* 27/1 (March 2017): 2.

teachings. Since the publication of *Rerum Novarum*,²⁷ the church has been proclaiming the faith that is rooted in Scripture but at the same time open to the secular sciences in order to better understand and address current moral and social issues. In the Catholic social teachings, insights from the social sciences have been recognized, adapted, and integrated to communicate the saving message and challenge of the faith which remains the ultimate goal of judging their authentic use.²⁸

Implications for the Teaching of Christian Moral Life in Religious Education

Vatican II's directive to nourish the teaching of moral theology with the study of Scripture is given directly to biblical and moral theologians but this is not limited to them. It is addressed to all involved in the ministry of the word including the religious educators who have to use and interpret Scripture in teaching. Religious educators have to question the very moralistic and sin-centered focus in teaching the Christian moral life and the lack of meaningful interpretation of the Scripture.²⁹ The developments in the use and interpretation of Scripture in moral theology have influenced on how Scripture must also be used and interpreted in the teaching of Christian moral life in religious education.

First, the directive on an enriched use of Scripture in

²⁷ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum: On Capital and Labor* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1891), http://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html.

²⁸ Roche, *Practical Catechesis: The Christian Faith as a Way of Life*, 50.

²⁹ Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, *National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines* (Manila, Philippines: Episcopal Commission for Catechesis and Catholic Education, 2007), paras. 270-72.

moral theology has been a guiding principle in the teaching of faith. This means that religious educators must also refer to Scripture in teaching fundamental moral principles such as compassion, solidarity, conscience, and freedom. Every good Christian morality lesson has to include the appropriate scripture texts and its parallel texts in explaining morality topics.

The Scripture's normative claim to the life of the Christian community must also be highlighted. This means that the Scripture must not be treated merely as story book that excites or arouses people in doing the good. Unintentionally, there are instances in religious education when the scripture texts are only used as a narrative to start a lesson. The teaching method no longer highlights the Christian message in the scripture texts that has moral implications for people's lives. In religious education, the Scripture must be used in enriching the whole process of understanding and teaching the faith. The Scripture's capacity to evaluate and critique moral situations, inform people's conscience and influence human decisions must be emphasized for the written word of God to deeply nourish the understanding and living out of the Christian moral life.

Second, the use and interpretation of Scripture in religious education should underline what God intends to communicate to the life of the present believers. There is a tendency to focus merely on the investigation and teaching of the original meaning of the scripture texts which becomes problematic and unattractive to many students. This is because many of the original meaning and message of the Scripture no longer relate with contemporary life.³⁰ The use and interpretation of the Scripture in religious education should go beyond the study of the original meaning of the scripture texts

³⁰ Ibid., 117.

because the Scripture continuously reveal new and deeper insights about what God wants to communicate to the life of people today. One way how this can be done is through the acknowledgment of the active presence of the Spirit in the scripture texts as well as in contemporary human experiences. The Spirit reaches out to the person's mind and heart by touching and inspiring the human senses, intuition and emotions through the Scripture's symbolic and metaphorical language. This reaching-in of the Spirit through the person's mind and heart empowers their human imagination "to understand, re-understand and apply the Scriptural word of God"³¹ in their life today.

Third, the interpretation of Scripture in religious education must also be complemented by the use of other sources in understanding the faith. Comparable to the moral theologians' concern on human experiences in the teaching of Christian moral life, religious educators should also pay attention to the experiences of their students. In religious education "human experience refers to what happens in the life of an individual or community,"³² including sufferings, misfortunes, and other dreadful experiences. The students' significant human experiences such as friendship, family life, self-

³¹ Joseph L. Roche and Leonardo Z. Legazpi, "Imagination and Integration in the NCDP and CFC," in *A Companion to CFC A Collection of Essays on the History, Features and Use of Our National Catechism* (Manila, Philippines: ECCCE and Word and Life Publication, 1998), 59–60.

³² Maria Lucia C. Natividad, *Teaching the Faith* (Quezon City: Claretians Communications, 2018), 75; for the place of experience in process of theologizing, see Lieven Boeve, "Experience According to Edward Schillebeeckx: The Driving Force of Faith and Theology," in Lieven Boeve and L. Hemming, eds. *Divinising Experience: Essays in the History of Religious Experience from Origen to Ricoeur-Studies in Philosophical Theology*, 23 (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 199-225.

giving actions in helping others, and experiences of loss and betrayal must be integral to the search for the message of Scripture. The secular sciences can be helpful in understanding and drawing out valuable insights from these experiences. These insights can be used in shedding light on a deeper and more inspiring meaning of God's presence today. These insights can also help religious educators in enabling people to appreciate the Scripture as a source in their development toward maturity in Christian faith as they deal with daily concerns and struggles in following Jesus.

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Becoming a Church of the Poor in the New Normal in Light of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach

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Abstract: The recent experience with COVID-19, a pandemic that has further exposed the vulnerabilities of the poor in Philippine society, provides a socio-political and economic context for a re-emphasis of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines' (PCP II) Church of the Poor (COP). This paper argues that the crisis brought about by the pandemic affirms the importance of the COP but at the same time it provides a context to further deepen our understanding on what else can be done by a COP. To carry out the objective, Amartya Sen's definition of poverty that focuses on capabilities instead of income is used for synthetic analysis of poverty's face as it was experienced during the pandemic. This is used to further analyze how the Philippine Church can rekindle its commitment to be a Church of the Poor in the new normal.

Keywords: COVID-19 • Church of the Poor • New Normal • Capability Approach

Introduction

The year 2021 has been considered special by the Catholic Church in the Philippines as it marks the 500th year of the arrival of Christianity in its shores.¹ This was

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¹ The term Church in this work is broadly understood as the hierarchy, mainly the bishops with the priests. Sometimes, the CBCP

since 1521 when Portuguese navigator Ferdinand Magellan, carrying the Spanish flag, came to the Philippines and baptized a group of natives who became the first Christians in the archipelago. However, another important anniversary that is practically eclipsed by the quincentennial of Philippine Christianity is the thirtieth anniversary of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) convoked in 1991. Practically paled by the 1521 commemoration, the Philippine Church in general has apparently not given much attention to PCP II.² This, however, is lamentable because of what the council waded through the bishops, clergy, the religious, and the lay who attended it:

What then is the Church of the Poor? It means a Church that embraces and practices the evangelical spirit of poverty, which combines detachment from possessions with a profound trust in the Lord as the

or hierarchy is used interchangeably with “Church.” The author is aware that ecclesologically the concept of the Church (the Roman Catholic Church) includes both the ordained and the lay. However, the term is given a more particular meaning in order to highlight the specific location of the hierarchy (i.e. the bishops) in the analysis of structure, power relations, and the authorship of discourses which practically exclude the laity in the real and practical sphere of the Church. For points related to this see Antonio Moreno, SJ, *Church Society in Postauthoritarian Philippines: Narratives of Engaged Citizenship* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2008), 6-7.

² This does not mean that PCP II does not have any significance to the actual life of local Churches. Apparently, evidences show that the spirit of the Council has an impact in some dioceses. See Karl Gaspar, “Basic Ecclesial Communities in Mindanao: A Call to Continuing Missiological Relevance” *MST Review* 19/1 (2016): 37-66. According to Gaspar, “PCP II led to the full promotion of the setting up of the BECs in the Philippines; henceforth most dioceses in the country were encouraged to move towards this pastoral direction” (p. 38). Also see Ferdinand D. Dagmang, “From Vatican II to PCP II to BEC Too: Progressive Localization of a New State of Mind to a New State of Affairs,” *MST Review* 18/2 (2016): 63-75.

sole source of salvation. ... The Church of the Poor is one whose members and leaders have a special love for the poor. ... The Church of the poor will mean that the pastors and other Church leaders will give preferential attention and time to those who are poor, and will generously share of their own resources in order to alleviate their poverty and make them recognize the love of the Lord for them despite their poverty.³

Historians may argue that PCP II is not as historically significant as 1521. But in a theological and pastoral sense it is a landmark in the Philippine Church's renewal as it was, in essence, the Filipino people's reception of Vatican II.⁴ In PCP II, the Philippine bishops have expressed commitment to lead the Church with and for the poor. Since PCP II, various pastoral letters on poverty have been issued and pronounced under different leaderships of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP).

Forward to 2020, a catastrophic year for all peoples, the poor have again become the highlight as they suffer most because of an unexpected pandemic, COVID-19. Governments were forced to impose lockdowns more known to Filipinos as the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ). When cases of COVID-19 gradually surged in some parts of the Philippines, the imposition of the ECQ highlighted the depth and extent of poverty among Filipinos.

The succeeding discussion looks into the various specific aspects where the poor are most vulnerable during the pandemic and because of the lockdowns that were imposed by the government. Then, departing from

³ See Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippine (Pasay: St. Paul's, 1992), Part II (Church Renewed), 125 – 136. Henceforth shall be cited as PCP II.

⁴ Luis Antonio Tagle, "What Have We Become? Ten Years after PCP II," *Landas* 16/1 (2002): 108-111.

the social analysis of such an experience, the discussion will further move to how a Church of the Poor can once more reaffirm and re-invigorate its ecclesial commitment institutionalized in PCP II 1991.

Discussion Framework: The Church, Poverty, and the Poor

The Church of the Poor and the Meaning of Poverty

We begin this section with a delimitation: that our main concern is primarily on the theory (behind the discourse) of poverty and only secondarily whatever sound practice or advocacy should stem from it. In this light, the importance of a COP in a time of pandemic presupposes the necessity of asking the question who are the poor and primordially what is poverty or how do we or should we conceptualize poverty?

The said questions are important because apparently poverty is not an uncommon word in the Church's discourses and pastoral concern. It has many definitions and there are many approaches to it as there are biases among analysts, and this does not exclude the Church. Church leaders "speak about the poor much as social scientists and economists do."⁵ There is no question, for example, that there is a theological and biblical basis for a preferential option for the poor but who exactly are the poor that we call our own and how do we know that rightly they are the poor to whom the Church devotes its preferential mission? For the question to mean more than its rhetorical value both the question and the one asking it should be informed by a sound perspective on poverty or concept of poverty or else the whole (ecclesial)

⁵ Rhoderick John S. Abellanos, "Poverty of Words in Poverty Discourses: The Case of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines," *Philippine Sociological Review*, 61/1 (2014): 177.

discourse would be just a bundle of exhortations lacking in creative and transforming power.⁶

Though arguably the end of all concern for the poor and their poverty is to be uplifted from destitution, but this can only succeed if an employed strategy begins with the right perspective of poverty – what it is and what it is not. This way we would be able to answer, with greater confidence, the question: “[d]o prophets have useful things to say to politicians about appropriate policies toward the poor?”⁷

Constitutive of and central to PCP II’s vision of renewal is to become a Church of the Poor.⁸ Within the economic and political context of the country this means, among others, that the Church is actively involved in the fight against structural injustice and that the poor would feel at home with their Church as shown in their active participation in its life and mission.⁹ Precisely, the

⁶ We borrow the wordings of Aloysius L. Cartagenas in his work on the hermeneutic of Catholic Social Teaching. See Aloysius Lopez Cartagenas, *Unlocking the Church’s Best Kept Secret* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2012), 28. To paraphrase Cartagenas: How then are we to “rescue the meaning” of the Church of the Poor “from its limitations in the definitions and conceptualizations of various hierarchical texts and pronouncements in their varied limitations?”

⁷ Mary Jo Bane and Lawrence Mead, *Lifting Up the Poor: A Dialogue on Religion, Poverty and Welfare Reform* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 2003), 1.

⁸ See Ferdinand Dagmang, “From Vatican II to PCP II to BEC Too: Progressive Localization of a New State of Mind to a New State of Affairs,” *MST Review*, 18/2 (2016): 63-75; this article emphasizes that the Church of the Poor, as a principle/vision, may be made concrete through the Basic Ecclesial Communities. As PCP II states: “Our vision of the Church as communion, participation, and mission, about the Church as priestly, prophetic and kingly people, and as a Church of the Poor –a Church that is renewed – is today finding expression in one ecclesial movement. This is the movement to foster Basic Ecclesial Communities.” (PCP II 137), underscoring added.

⁹ Apparently there are many other dimensions of being a COP such as: (1) the embrace and practice of the evangelical spirit of

structural injustices have become more tangible as the country grapples with economic survival due to COVID-19. From the issue of the country's poor healthcare system to the increasing displacement of laborers, the question now is how shall a Church that vowed to prefer to walk in solidarity with the poor move forward in its ministry and mission? Here we are invited to revisit the very word "poverty."¹⁰

Poverty: Lack of Capabilities, Unfreedoms and its Multi-dimensions

There are many definitions of poverty as there are approaches to measure it as a phenomenon and condition. Nevertheless, we are going to use Amartya Sen's notion of poverty as *capability deprivation* which goes beyond its common definition as lack or lowness of

poverty, (2) the special love for the poor by both its leaders (hierarchy) and members (laity), (3) the non-discrimination of the poor simply because of their poverty which requires a review of the Church's own structures and practices related to temporalities, (4) pastors would give preferential attention to the poor including the generous sharing of resources if only to alleviate poverty, (5) the practice of solidarity with the poor especially those afflicted by misery, (6) the poor themselves becoming evangelizers and not merely being treated as subjects of evangelization, (7) an orientation and tilt of the Church's center of gravity in favor of the needy, and (8) the willingness to follow Jesus Christ through poverty and oppression. See PCP II, 125-136, related topics are also mentioned in part III of the Conciliar Document, i.e. peasants (390), urban poor (392), fisherfolk (394), and disabled (399).

¹⁰ After all, pastoral, theological, or moral discourse are not privileged language that are immune from the teaching-learning process of an evolving world. From this critique we proceed to how the Church in the new normal can revitalize its discourse on poverty in a manner that is more relevant and connected to the people that it ministers. See Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa, "Poverty of Words in Poverty Discourses: The Case of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines," *Philippine Sociological Review*, 61/1 (2014): 177.

income, (which has become the standard criterion of identification of poverty).¹¹ In an essay on Sen and Catholic Social Thought, Verstraeten gives a sound explanation why the perspectives of the economist and moral philosopher are enriching to the dynamic nature of the Church's faith-based tradition.¹²

The capability approach to poverty is underpinned by economic and ethical arguments that critique the minimalist and reductionist (income-based poverty) definition which cannot serve as basis for a robust analysis of people's lives and conditions. The philosophy behind this however is summarized in how our economist-philosopher explains the relationship between income and achievements, between commodities and capabilities, and between wealth and our ability to live as we would like.¹³ Economic growth both in the micro and macro levels cannot sensibly be treated as an end in itself.¹⁴ The desire to have more wealth is not the end in itself. To desire wealth for its own sake does not make sense. The drive to earn money is connected to a higher value and that is to live a good life, understood in Sen's terms as capabilities. "Expanding the freedoms that we have reason to value not only makes our lives richer and

¹¹ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Oxford, 1999), 19-20, 87-92. Also see by the same author *The Idea of Justice* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 254-257. A similar treatment on the topic related to income and wellbeing is found in A. Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (New York: Russell Sage/Harvard, 1995), 28-30.

¹² Johan Verstraeten, "Catholic Social Thought and Amartya Sen on Justice," Peter Rona and Laszlo Zsolnai, eds., *Economics as a Moral Science* (Switzerland: Springer, 2017), 222.

¹³ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 13

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14. Precisely why even in the macroeconomic level, Sen (together with Joseph Stiglitz and Jean-Paul Fitoussi) would argue that conventional economic measures such as Gross Domestic Product does not and cannot capture quality of life or subjective well-being. See Joseph Stiglitz, A. Sen and J-P Fitoussi. *Mis-measuring our Lives: Why GDP Doesn't Add Up* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 64-65.

more unfettered, but also allows us to be fuller social persons, exercising our own volitions and interacting with – influencing – the world in which we live.”¹⁵

In a later work, *The Idea of Justice*, Sen explains that not even the availability of resources would serve as a guarantee of fuller wellbeing. Simply put, an income that is way above the minimum wage may not automatically mean that one is not poor. There is a variability in the relationship between resources and poverty, one that is deeply contingent on the characteristics of the respective people and the environment in which they live both natural and social.¹⁶ This is an important point to highlight because one has to realize, as the discussion unfolds, that in reality – as it is in many countries – the poor are not just those who live below the poverty line. And as Sen would put it, real poverty (understood in terms of capability deprivation) may be much more intense than what we can deduce from income data.¹⁷

The foregoing frames our interpretation or analysis of the poor’s experience in a time of pandemic. By analyzing and reflecting on the condition of the poor beyond income we get to create a gestalt of their interconnected unfreedoms. The lack or absence of capabilities are basically limitations that are not only economic but also social and political in nature causing and creating more disabilities on the part of the poor, and furthermore preventing them from achieving those things that they find more reason to value in life.

At this juncture the discussion turns to the face of poverty in a time of pandemic specifically within the context of the Philippine experience when the Enhanced Community Quarantine was enforced and thereby

¹⁵ Ibid., 14-15.

¹⁶ Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 254.

¹⁷ Ibid., 256.

imposing many limitations on the lives of the Filipinos.

The Face of Poverty in a Time of Pandemic: What it Means to be Poor in a Time of Crisis

Poverty in the Philippines: The Figures

Poverty incidence in the Philippines is at 16.6%, which means that 17.6 million Filipinos are poor.¹⁸ According to the Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA] a family of five (5) needs around 10,727 PhP to meet their minimum basic food and non-food needs. With the same family size 7,528 PhP per month is needed to meet food needs. Supplementing this income-based measure of poverty is the self-rated survey on poverty by the Social Weather Stations which as of December 2019 reports that 54% among Filipino families consider themselves as *mahirap* or poor. The estimated numbers of Self-Rated Poor families are 13.1 million for December and 10.3 million for September. The latest Self-Rated Poverty rate is the highest since the 55% in September 2014.¹⁹

The figures above are intended to basically provide a measurable starting point. But as has been established earlier it is also important to analyze the interconnected unfreedoms of the poor. In fact, a reading of poverty using

¹⁸ Philippine Statistics Authority, “Proportion of Poor Filipinos Estimated at 16.6 percent in 2018” [available online]: <https://psa.gov.ph/poverty-press-releases/nid/144752>.

¹⁹ Social Weather Stations, “Fourth Quarter 2019 Social Weather Survey: Self-Rated Poverty rises by 12 points to 5-year-high 54%” [available online]: <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artclisppage/?artsyscode=ART-20200123140450>. In terms of the capacity to purchase food, SWS in its December 2019 survey found that 35% of families rate their food as Mahirap or Poor, termed by SWS as Food-Poor. This is 6 points above the 29% in September 2019. The estimated numbers of Food-Poor families are 8.6 million in December and 7.1 million in September.

capability as a criterion would highlight that in the face of a pandemic there are also some, if not many, wage earners who are placed in a vulnerable situation because the paralysis caused by the ECQ increased their unfreedoms, incapability, and deprivation. This brings us to a discussion on poverty as a phenomenon with various dimensions: poverty in terms of location, weak housing materials, vulnerability to exploitation, powerlessness, and proneness to human rights violations.²⁰

Poverty has a Location: The Issue of Housing

It was perceived during the pandemic that Filipinos and many among the poor were unruly and thus non-compliant of government restrictions. The common observation was that those who live in slums or in urban poor communities were stubborn in following the imposed guidelines from national and local governments especially in terms of social distancing and curfew. Apparently, the several weeks of ECQ highlighted the bias of some Filipinos who belong to the middle and high income classes against the poor especially in highly urbanized cities like Metro Manila and Metro Cebu.²¹

People's responses to the government's ECQ varied depending on their economic capabilities. Physical distancing was not hard to comply for those who have enough space but not for those who live in densely

²⁰ Robert Chambers, "Poverty and Livelihood: Whose Reality Counts?" in *Environment and Urbanization* 7(1): 175. Also, R. Chambers, "What is Poverty? Who Asks? Who Answers?" in *Poverty in Focus* (Dec 2006): 3-4.

²¹ Take the case of Sitio Zapatera, Barrio Luz in Cebu City. See Marit Stinus-Cabugon, "135 Covid-19 cases in Cebu City neighborhood" [available online]: <https://www.manilatimes.net/2020/04/20/opinion/columnists/135-covid-19-cases-in-cebu-city-neighborhood/716241/>

populated urban poor communities. The location and arrangement of the houses of the poor do not follow the same formalities and luxuries in spacing, symmetry and of course the quality of materials with those who belong to the middle class or high income brackets.²² Precisely why the strict observance of the ECQ was relatively not difficult to observe by the middle class and the rich. But this was not the case with households with ten family members in a thirty square meter room.

COVID-19 magnified the material face of poverty. It was very clear in the experience of the urban poor that being poor is not just about lack or absence of income but the vulnerability to all forms of threats. The pandemic made the lives of the poor more difficult in various counts. First, they were forced to stay at home which, unlike the rich or the middle class, literally meant being imprisoned in a practically paralyzing situation. Second, the set-up of their villages was a factor that increased the probability of transmission. In Cebu City, the pattern obviously revealed that the concentration of the cases were mostly in slums packed with people.²³

The COVID-19 pandemic lays bare before our eyes that affordable housing is a serious problem in the Philippines. According to Arcilla, “the lack of affordability is a persistent problem in socialized housing programs in the Philippines. Affordability is a critical component of the right to adequate housing. Without access to affordable housing, the poor are forced to create

²² Robert Chambers, “Participation, Pluralism and Perceptions of Poverty: a Conference Paper” in *Paper for the International Conference on Multidimensional Poverty*: Brasilia August 29-31 2005, p. 14.

²³ Ryan Macasero and Michael Bueza “MAP: Where are the coronavirus cases in Cebu City?” [available online]: <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/260554-map-coronavirus-cases-cebu-city>

homes in unsafe spaces and in slums.”²⁴ Since the late 1990s the government has estimated some 700,000 units for Metro Manila, and approximately three (3) million in the entire Philippines.²⁵ Sadly, it has been an unsolved problem passed on from one administration to another. Despite the promises of past administrations (e.g. President Estrada who was most popular in his pro-poor campaign advocacy) many Filipinos have remained without decent homes or places of dwelling.

The poor population management strategy of the government (not to mention that delayed legislation of the Reproductive Health law) has exacerbated the problem of congestion in urban areas. The National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) reported an estimated backlog of over 900,000 units between 2005 and 2010. Already in 1994, economist Arsenio Balisacan emphasized the correlation between housing and health, which according to him (and this was decade ago) are growing concerns of the poor rapidly urbanizing areas.²⁶ Logically, there is an inverse relationship between the quality of housing and the chances of vulnerability to health hazards, and this is something felt more intensely by the urban poor during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Economic Exploitation

In a trickle-down economy, any crisis that would hit the main economic drivers would automatically sacrifice the poor who are low income, daily wage, or seasonal

²⁴ Chester Antonino Arcilla, “Ensuring the affordability of socialized housing: Towards liveable and sustainable homes for the poor,” *UP CIDS Policy Brief* 2019-15, 1.

²⁵ Edna Co, et al., *Philippine Democracy Assessment: Economic and Social Rights* (Pasig: Anvil, 2007), 47.

²⁶ Arsenio Balisacan, *Poverty, Urbanization and Development* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 1994), 77-78.

earners. The ECQ due to Covid-19 hit hardest vendors, tricycle, and *habal-habal* drivers, and small-time mechanics. In effect their powerlessness was highlighted – concrete in the face of income-less citizens who would be dependent on government subsidies and prone to political manipulation. In its March 19, 2020 impact assessment, the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) forecasted that given the “simultaneous adverse effects on the supply and the demand side of the economy” the Philippines should expect “a cumulative loss of PHP428.7 to PHP 1,355.6 billion in gross value added (in current prices).” This would be “equivalent to 2.1 to 6.6 percent of nominal GDP in 2020.” NEDA further added that “without mitigating measures, this would imply a reduction in the Philippine’s real GDP growth to -0.6 to 4.3 percent in 2020.”

Consequent to economic losses would be displacement of labor. As early as April 2020, the Department of Labor and Employment’s (DOLE) Job Displacement Monitoring Report registered a total of 108,620 workers from 2,317 establishments affected due to the implementation of Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) and Temporary Closure (TC).²⁷ Uncertainty in the government’s aid and subsidy were issues among low-income families. Displaced workers who had to continue feeding their family had to partly if not largely rely on the assistance of the government. When the ECQ, for example, was implemented on March 28, some people in Cebu City,

²⁷ Either the workers earned less due to the adjustment of the work scheme or schedule or did not earn at all. Around 889 establishments with 41,311 workers implemented FWAs while 368 companies engaged in reduction of workdays, affected 15,556 workers. Other companies also imposed forced leave. Around 9,941 workers were without work from around 225 companies while 58 other companies with 3,655 employees were also affected by the anti-virus measures.

without hesitation, went to their barangay hall in order to inquire about the ECQ pass and the subsidies or allowances. Issues and concerns about the Social Amelioration Package (SAP) became divisive points among social classes.

It is easy to just follow the government's policies if there is trust but sadly this is not the case with many Filipinos in relation to their leaders. Given this context, again, the poor were labelled as ignorant and disobedient to rules. This was very much concrete when Barangay Luz of Cebu City was first announced to have a surge of COVID-19 positive cases among its residence. Comments such as (in Cebuano) *kining mga squatter gahi gyud ug ulo* (these informal settles are hard-headed or stubborn) and *bogo gyud ning mga tawhana* (these people are dumb) were all around social media. But the people who were called stubborn and dumb were the same masses who cheered for the politicians during elections. Sadly, these are the people who are continually exploited as warm bodies in a populist-based politics. There were reports, for example, that some barangays required a voter's identification (ID) card as requirement for government assistance. "Dispersed and anxious as they are about access to resources, work and income, it is difficult for them [the poor] to organize or bargain. Often physically weak and economically vulnerable, they lack influence. Subject to the power of others, they are easy to ignore or exploit. Powerlessness is also, for the powerful, the least acceptable point of intervention to improve the lot of the poor."²⁸

It was easy for some Filipinos to just say that a total lockdown or even a martial law should be implemented in order to save everyone. But this was according to those who lived with safety nets in their socio-economic

²⁸ Chambers, *Poverty and Livelihood*, 190.

security (savings, continual income, investments, networks and connections). These people need not worry so much about life's burdens caused by the ineffective and inefficient state bureaucracy.

Powerlessness: Humiliation and Human Rights Violations

The material conditions of the poor made them more prone to abuses by the police or officers of the law during the ECQ.²⁹ Sen explains: "...destitution can produce provocation for defying established laws and rules."³⁰ The lack or even absence of any capability and capacity to push their agenda made the poor subject to various layers of political and even legal abuse.³¹

This was the experience with some residents of San Roque, a slum area in Quezon City. They were dispersed and some twenty-one (21) were jailed after *Kadamay*, an activist group, was accused to have incited them to turn against the government.³² Then there was the incident in Parañaque City that involved the alleged "torture" of curfew violators. Allegedly the violators were made to sit under the sun for an hour. The barangay captain of Barangay San Isidro clarified that he did not punish the

²⁹ See Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa, "Poverty's Political Face in a Slum: Focus on Human Rights" in *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 39 [2011]: 149 – 162. Also see R.J.S. Abellanosa, "The Political Face of Poverty: Cases of Human Rights Violations in Pasil, Cebu City" in *Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 2/2 (2011): 132-148.

³⁰ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence* (New York: Norton, 2006), 142-143.

³¹ According to Sen, "poverty and inequality closely relate to each other" in *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (New York: Oxford, 1981), 23.

³² CNN Philippines, "21 protesters demanding food aid arrested in Quezon City" [available online]: <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/4/1/quezon-city-protesters-arrested-.html>

violators as there were merely asked to “stay outside the barangay hall to maintain social distancing while their names were being taken.”³³ One of those arrested (alias John) said: “It’s easy for some people not to go outside because they have food and money. But there are people like me who need to go outside to work so we can eat something for the day.”

Clearly, the poor can easily become victims of the power that is meant to guide and protect them. Without power and influence, plus ignorance, joblessness, and greater vulnerability to diseases, the poor have little chance of asserting their rights most especially in the most difficult situations.³⁴

It can be tentatively concluded at this point that the experience of the Filipino poor during the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the gaps and failures of a state that claims to govern democratically. Such failure is explainable by the fact that the universal value of democracy is more than just being a mere mechanism of maintaining political representation and power transmission. Democracy, and election as a core element of it, should translate to people’s achievements of greater capabilities through social and economic rights, and thus give them greater reason to continually appreciate their freedom not only as an instrument to achieve certain ends (in life) but also as an end in itself.³⁵ Elections and the whole idea and practice of representation are just aspects of democracy among others. In Sen’s words:

³³ Dexter Cabalza, “Paranaque village chief accused of ‘torturing’ curfew violators” [available online]: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1248527/paranaque-village-chief-accused-of-torturing-curfew-violators>

³⁴ See R.J.S. Abellanosa, “Poverty’s Political Face in a Slum: Focus on Human Rights.” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 39 (2011):154-160.

³⁵ Amartya Sen, “Democracy as a Universal Value,” *Journal of Democracy* 10/3 (1999): 11.

...even elections can be deeply defective if they occur without the different sides getting an adequate opportunity to present their respective cases, or without the electorate enjoying the freedom to obtain news and to consider the views of the competing protagonists. Democracy is a demanding system, and not just a mechanical condition (like majority rule) taken in isolation.³⁶

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic more specifically the sustained crisis which the poor have undergone, capabilities, understood within the framework of Sen's philosophy, means the facilitation by the very democratic process and its translation ultimately to the citizens' achievement of capabilities that are necessary for the expansion of freedoms. This means the minimization of poverty as a condition of incapability. This means, concretely, the people's greater chances to: access to housing, transportation, healthcare particularly hospitalization, food and water security, education, and stable employment. Apparently, these social needs have been part of the promises of politicians during elections. Sadly, they continue to capitalize on the lack or the absence of basic services thus perpetuating people's patronage and dependence on non-systematized government assistance oftentimes disguised as charity. Consequently, elections are practically ceremonial formalities that exacerbate our dysfunctional democracy.³⁷

³⁶ Ibid., 9.

³⁷ See Jane Hutchison, "The 'Disallowed' Political Participation of Manila's Urban Poor," *Democratization* 14/5 (2007): 853-872. Hutchison has aptly described the situation: "the alternative modes of political participation – of a societal incorporation type – are created that assume policy consensus and interest convergence over social inclusion taking a particular, neo-liberal, path that effectively limits the urban poor's entitlements to the securitisation of their own self-built shelters" (p. 868).

Poverty is a word commonly used and discussed during the election period and largely exploited by politicians in order to gain support from the masses. Sadly, people's access to decent housing, transportation, healthcare particularly hospitalization, food and water security, education, and stable employment remain largely and extensively unmet. After elections, officials of both national and local governments would be busy with day-to-day politics. The multidimensional experiences of vulnerability and poverty among some Filipinos in the face of a crisis further highlights the deficiencies of Philippine democracy specifically in the inadequacy or absence of basic services.

The Church of the Poor: A Critique of Three-Decade Ecclesial Discourse In Light of the COVID-19 Experience

The Church has a prophetic role in the political sphere rooted in the Gospel values. To borrow the words of Jacques Maritain on democracy, we may, in essence, speak of the same with politics: "it cannot do without the prophetic factor, and that the people need a prophet."³⁸ Precisely why there is a need for a critical analysis and reflection on where the COP, since PCP II, could also have focused its engagement with the government and thus helped generate and strengthen the advancement of people's right to social and economic welfare. After all, if politics ought to actualize humanity's moral and ethical persuasions, then the Church must meet those who are in a position of power in that point where politics and morality intersect. To rephrase a moral theologian: it is never enough (for the Church) to just notice those whom

³⁸ Jacques Maritain, "The Democratic Character," Robert Caponigri, ed. *Modern Catholic Thinkers, vol. II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 350.

others would rather not, and look ‘preferentially’ at their concerns. The added task is to ensure that the poor whatever dehumanized faces they may wear be encountered less as objects of pity but more as interacting subjects.³⁹

An Examination of Priorities and Discourses

In 2012, the CBCP through Cebu Archbishop Jose Palma, issued a *Pastoral Exhortation on the Era of New Evangelization*.⁴⁰ The document explains the Philippine Church’s preparations for the quinquennial celebration in 2021 and acknowledges the continuity in the local Church’s thrust from PCP II up to the present. It underscores that constitutive of evangelization is, among others, the “imperative of ‘bringing Good News to the poor’ (*pauperes evangelizantur*).”⁴¹ In fact, the CBCP did not deny that the Philippine Church still has “a long way from the vision to becoming in truth a ‘church of the poor’—committed to struggle to bring down poverty among our people, committed to striving to do all we can to help bring about ‘a civilization of justice and love’.” According to the Exhortation:

The Year of the Poor is “dedicated to committing ourselves more firmly to our vision of becoming truly a Church of the Poor. The new evangelization is also a

³⁹ Dionisio M. Miranda, “What will You Have Me Do for You? The Theological Ethics Agenda from an Asian Perspective,” James Keenan, ed., *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church: The Plenary Papers from the First Cross Cultural Conference on Catholic Theological Ethics* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2008), 178.

⁴⁰ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, “CBCP Pastoral Exhortation on the Era of New Evangelization (longer version)” in <http://cbcponline.net/cbc-pastoral-exhortation-on-the-era-of-new-evangelization-longer-version/>, access 1 May 2020.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

powerful call from the Lord to follow in His footsteps to be evangelically poor. How far have we journeyed to our vision of Church? How shall we assist the materially poor to face the challenges of hunger and poverty, of globalization and climate change? And together with them eradicate the evil of corruption and the economic and political imbalances of our society? At the same time we realize that the materially poor in our midst have the God-given power to tell the story of the poor Christ who by His poverty liberates and enriches us. The whole Church, rich and poor, powerful and powerless, have to be in solidarity in the work of restoring integrity and truth, justice and peace – love – in our benighted land.⁴²

Apparently, the bishops did not fail to mention the poor in their pronouncements. The year 2015 was, in fact, declared as the Year of the Poor.⁴³ But five years since then, and most especially in light of the current experience of COVID-19, what has happened to the poor? What was the significance and the impact of the Church's pronounced commitment to work in solidarity for the restoration of justice and peace in our land? In hindsight, it can be said that although it is not fair to say that the Church has taken for granted the poor but neither is it not unfair to say that the Church has not said enough for the poor that it has identified to be its own in PCP II. It is true that within the Church there are religious congregations and sectors who have done genuine service to the poor. For example, Catholic educational institutions through the community extension services, social action and outreach programs have helped so many among those who are least in society in more ways than one. However, it is one thing to speak of these *ad intra institutions* and their initiatives, it is another thing to

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

speak of the Church specifically its leadership and how it deals with poverty as a social issue and as a systemic problem of the country.

Apparently, poverty is not a top priority in the CBCP's pastoral agenda as evidenced by its documents or pronouncements. In a study on Episcopal Conferences and their theory and praxis based on Catholic social teaching, Terence McGoldrick observes that the statements on CST by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) "dropped from an average of 2.1 per year over the 1990s to 1.5 per year from 2000 to 2012."⁴⁴ PCP II (around 1991 up to 1992) according to the author marks the surge in lengthy statements. However, the years that follow especially those closer to present have seen the change in discursive style wherein the bishops would typically issue one-page statements that focus on particular issues or events like elections, nuclear power plants, and tax law. Furthermore, in the past 12 years, the brief statements by the CBCP "have appeared at about twice the rate of the longer statements (2.8 vs. 1.5 per year)."⁴⁵ McGoldrick adds that the statements of the CBCP "indicate trust and cooperation among the bishops and the EC president and staff, after decades of contending on these sensitive social issues. They do not require a plenary meeting or consultative process and allow the Church to have a voice in the regular flow of events in local society."⁴⁶

The approach to poverty in the Church's discourses basically shows lack of focus in its treatment of the issue. If we trace the continuum of the Church's discourse back to PCP II, it can be said that the post-PCP II concerns of

⁴⁴ Terence McGoldrick, "Episcopal Conferences Worldwide and Catholic Social Thought, in Theory and Praxis: An Update," *Theological Studies* 75/2 (2014): 382.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

the Church have practically detoured from the vision of the plenary council and it can be rightly said that becoming a Church of the Poor has remained largely an unfinished project. The vision of the Philippine Church according to the Acts and Decrees of PCP II did not “just aim at sustaining the usual charitable activities of the Church which has been around since the time of the first mendicant friars.”⁴⁷ The preferential option waged in 1991 was in itself a theology of liberation which in essence proposed a commitment to “combat the systemic and structural dimensions of poverty.”⁴⁸

A survey of the documents issued by the CBCP from 1991 up to 2011 would reveal that even after PCP II the discourses (pastoral letters and exhortations) do not form a single, coherent and consistent empirically grounded hierarchical discourse on poverty (the closest could be the Exhortation on the Philippine Economy). Apparently, the pastoral letters and exhortations were written by different CBCP presidents and it goes without saying that their substance and style, as it appears, vary from one conference leadership to another. They were responses to specific issues within a particular socio-political and economic context. Hence, despite the Philippine hierarchy’s passionate discourses against poverty not one of the documents can be taken as the sole concrete framework which the CBCP may use in order to understand the problem of poverty. It is in fact puzzling how the CBCP can continue talking about poverty, siding with the poor, and condemning government programs for being anti-poor without a minimum standard concept or definition of poverty.

Prior to COVID-19, the Church’s estrangement from

⁴⁷ Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa, “Discursive Detours and Weak Gatekeeping: The Deficit of the Philippine Bishops’ Church of the Poor Discourse,” *Political Theology* 16/3 (2015): 230.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 230-231.

its people was increasing. The sustained support to President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs by Catholic Filipinos no less shows the contrast between the said to be deep Filipino religiosity on the one hand and their disconnect from the official theological paradigm of the hierarchy on the other. One cannot but wonder why the Church especially the bishops continue to talk about the poor; but then who are these poor that they are talking about?

In Search for a Church of the Poor: A Challenge to the Philippine Church Leadership

The ambivalent political behavior of the Philippine hierarchy (CBCP) with the different presidential administrations can be accounted for the incoherent attitude and approach towards its own commitment to be a Church of the Poor. Even a synthetic rundown of how the Church politically positioned itself in recent years, show that in several instances poverty is not always a top priority in comparison to the other interests of the hierarchy. After EDSA Dos in 2001 the Church distanced itself from politics under the presidency of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.⁴⁹ Her concessionary attitude towards the bishops pushed back the needed pressure from the Church to advance some of the social reforms in the country that were long overdue. Under the presidency of Benigno Aquino III from 2010 up to 2016, the bishops were focused in fighting against the Reproductive Health bill. The issue on reproductive health could have been an opportunity for a more serious dialogue on the problem of poverty in the Philippines. The Church could have

⁴⁹ R.J.S. Abellanosa, *Discursive Detours and Weak Gatekeeping*, 234. Also see Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa, "The CBCP and Philippine Politics: 2005 and After," *Asia Pacific Social Science Review*, Vol. 8/1 (2008): 73-88.

interrogated the government's population agenda in light of the Church's teaching on integral development. In fact, the Church could have come to the defense of the poor by asking the government if it has concrete parallel developmental plans on how to help the poor other than just promoting women's rights through RH devices.

Unfortunately, the bishops were more focused on what would become an ideological theme of "pro-life versus pro-choice." The hierarchy and their supporters including the lay who can be classified as "*churched*" were more concerned with defending the family, protecting the sanctity of marriage and virginity, among others. The purist theological paradigm that dominated the discourse of the hierarchy especially during the first years of Benigno Aquino's administration contributed to the Church's further alienation from its people. It became clear that many of the clergy were more concerned with their interests and could afford to disregard the signs of the times when pushed to the defensive in terms of its own agenda.⁵⁰

Then Rodrigo Duterte came to power and practically overturned the system left by the previous administration. The focus of the political debate has shifted to the need to end the proliferation of illegal drugs vis-à-vis human rights. With a total commitment and a passionate conviction to kill all drug users up to the last one of them, the Church has found in Duterte a different kind of political drama. With a high approval rating and a highly effective social media machinery, bishops and priests have difficulty engaging Duterte. The president's use of ad hominem attacks that can really discredit the

⁵⁰ See Eric Marcelo Genilo, S.J., "Epilogue: The Church of PCP II after the RH Bill Debate," Eric Marcelo Genilo, Agnes Brazal, and Daniel Franklin Pilario, eds., *The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines: Quo Vadis?* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2015), 169-189.

credibility of any opponent has pushed back the Church to the margins. Unfortunately, the marginalized bishops and priests are not getting support from their marginalized flock. The hierarchy and the clergy have not also succeeded in putting up a united front against Duterte. Not even the bishops who used to be vocal against government issues could put up a strong criticism against the issues of alleged human rights violations of the current administration. Despite the marginalization of the poor under Duterte, the Church's statements are crafted to sound safe, balanced, and calibrated. Forced to go back to its sacristy, the Church especially the bishops have become focused on internal ecclesiastical affairs. Precisely why it is not surprising to hear preparations for the quincentennial of Christianity's arrival in the Philippines mainly and essentially in religious and liturgical terms.

The predicament of the poor during the COVID-19 pandemic synthesized the so many gaps and deficiencies of Philippine society. We can enumerate at least seven areas where the Philippine government has failed its people: (1) healthcare system and health facilities, (2) poverty and urbanization, (3) assistance to people with physical and mental disabilities and the ageing, (4) mass public transport system not just in the capital region but also in the other major or developing urban centers in the country, (5) food security and agriculture, (6) family planning and population management, and (7) decentralized governance (grounded in the principle of subsidiarity).

Apparently, the abovementioned agenda have been largely disregarded by the Philippine government. The pandemic has shown that Philippine democracy more concretely in the aspect of social and economic rights remains largely wanting. This is not to say that efforts were not made in order to help people move forward and

survive amidst a serious threat. Indeed, it is fair to say that there were efforts and to some extent such did help people cross the threshold of difficulty in the current situation. However, the experiences of people presented above using the gestalt of the political face of poverty goes to show that many of the programs and projects across administrations lack continuity and coherence. Such a failure is not only a matter of political ineffectiveness or inefficiency but also of ethical bankruptcy.

The exploitative conditions that have been sustained through the years were clearly highlighted by the people's poverty and their vulnerability to the very system that is supposed to defend them during COVID-19. They have become objects of humiliation and (human rights) violations, and although they were given assistance but such was also not without any color of political opportunism. It is unthinkable how a country that professes, through its constitution, to "promote a just and humane society and promote the common good under the rule of law and the regime of truth and freedom," among other values, continues to live in a widening economic divide.

After decades of elections the concept and practice of representation have been proven to be a failure in facilitating people's movement out from their unfreedoms. This is concrete in leaders who are popular but who have not optimized the powers and opportunities of representation in order to maximize the country's political resources and thereby create tangible benefits to people: basic services in the form of healthcare, housing, public transportation and food. Representation has been used to further perpetuate the same set of representatives. And as the system continues in all its outdated fashion poor Filipinos are continually caught in various forms of unfreedoms and thus deprived of so many capabilities and opportunities. They have remained low

in financial literacy, lacking in support systems and other economic safety nets. Precisely why in a time of pandemic they cannot but panic due to a perceived difficulty in life that would practically push them to greater vulnerabilities.

But the whole situation is not just a political and economic concern. It is also one that should deeply concern the Church. Vatican II after all has clearly said that the people's grief and anxieties are also that of the Church. A COP should not only say enough on these issues, it has to understand well enough the reality of poverty in the Philippines.

Toward a Renewed Preferential Option for the Poor by a Church in the New Normal

Much has been said about society's changes in the so-called new normal but what awaits the Church in a world that has suffered a lot and will perhaps continue to because of COVID-19? In a society that is increasingly secular, the Church, and here we specifically speak of its leadership, has a calling to renew in a radical way its preferential option for the poor. Already in 1967, Pope Paul VI emphasized the Church's deep interest in and concern for the progressive development of peoples particularly in "the case of those peoples who are trying to escape the ravages of hunger, poverty, endemic disease and ignorance; of those who are seeking a larger share in the benefits of civilization and a more active improvement of their human qualities; of those who are consciously striving for fuller growth."⁵¹

A renewed preferential option for the poor by the Philippine Church coincides and gives fuller meaning to the commemoration of the quincentennial anniversary of

⁵¹ *Populorum Progressio*, 1

Christian presence in the country. Such an event is auspicious for the Church to exercise its prophetic and pastoral role by engaging politics through rational discourse, and that by purifying the State especially in areas where it has failed to live up to promote justice being the intrinsic criterion of all political life, it would revitalize its very communion with the world whose joys, grief, and anxieties are also its own.

The COVID-19 pandemic may be viewed in various ways through various lenses. One may read things mainly from the perspective of charity, that is, the catastrophic event was a moment to help one's neighbors through whatever initiative such as donations, fund drives, and outreach activities among others. These are undeniably essential and even integral to the collective calling to walk with one another in the spirit of fraternity. However, one may also read, and still from a Christian perspective, the situation as a moment of prophetic dialogue with the world especially with those who are in power to whom the achievement of justice in the sphere of politics is both a responsibility and a vocation. This means that, learning from the situation, the Church especially its leadership, must not miss out reading the signs of the times of the whole situation, being attentive to the cries of the poor who have been victims of social injustice, and whose poverty have become more intense under conditions of limited mobility and limited access to life's basic necessities.

Under the new normal, it is imperative for a COP to review and reflect its commitment to the poor keeping in mind with humility that though the Church is a teacher it has a lot to learn from society and the world because the truth that comes from God continues to gradually unfold in the landscape of human experience. If we may appropriate to the Church what one moral theologian says of Christian ethics, if the Church is an instrument

for the methodic search for the humanizing will of God then the routine extinction or degradation of human life through the absence or denial of basic needs like food, water, and shelter cannot but be the primary content or subject matter, as the gospel itself is witness.⁵²

Within the framework of Amartya Sen's perspective, the advocacy to help the poor not excluding lobbying for reforms that should benefit the poor, should focus on increasing people's capabilities and chances of wellbeing. In a post-pandemic scenario, efforts to help the poor no matter how well publicized cannot be supported until and unless they would lead to structural changes that would guarantee a systematized protection of the poor in many aspects of welfare services should it be the case that another wave of pandemic strikes. Learning from what happened to the Filipino nation, a Church of the poor in a new normal has to be more assertive in heightening people's consciences and efforts to demand the government to recognize the ethical imperatives of governance.

Apparently, the agenda abovementioned are difficult to put forward under the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte. But a Church of the poor cannot just enjoy living within the confines of its conveniences. We have seen how much the poor have suffered in a time of pandemic not really because the virus is fatal but because as a society we remain unprepared to handle worse situations given the vulnerabilities of people due to the experience of multidimensional unfreedoms: poor infrastructure, limitations in mobility, lack of savings, vulnerability to abuse, powerlessness and lack of bargaining capacity and the pre-existence of various health-related concerns among many others.

⁵² Miranda, *What Will You Have Me Do for You?*, 177.

He who wages to prefer the poor must constantly struggle against all forms of obstacle to feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, and defending the oppressed among others and this even includes unceasingly struggling against the fear of losing one's riches, comfort, benefactors and political allies as a consequence of siding with those who are abused, marginalized, forgotten, and least favored in society.⁵³

⁵³ Abellanosa, *Discursive Detours and Weak Gatekeeping*, 245.

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Society and Culture: Matrix and Schema for Character Formation

Ferdinand D. Dagmang ♦

Abstract: This paper deals with how society and culture may shape us; how some sub-cultures may shape 'others'; how we behave and represent our own worlds replete with models for our imitation. Despite the socio-cultural determination, it is assumed in this study that in the process of formation, choice is possible; and that choice is limited. Choice is possible when one is free to choose, that is, when one is able to choose other than the possible range of choices offered by society and culture. I am free to choose my food because I am free to choose other than those offered by McDonalds or KFC or Chowking or Jollibee, etc. because I am free to refuse them and the other range of choices possible. Character formation (and choice) faces limits when the range of choices is narrowed down to what is necessary—more so when one is constrained by mimetic upbringing, one that is largely limited to imitating others' or elders' choices.

Keywords: Society • Culture • Enculturation • Scripting • Mimesis • Character Formation

Introduction

What if Filipinos were born in a place where respect is abundant and humility and decency plentiful? Or today's citizens were born, at least, in a time when everyone was treating everyone kindly and leaders were respectful and have not seen or heard of intolerance, high-handedness, overbearing patriarchy, corruption,

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lapdog mentality [my apologies to lapdogs], and super-abundant idiocy? Would it not be a blissful scenario if all of us were born in that ideal place and time? How do we imagine ourselves today if we were raised in “a time when men were kind; when their voices were soft”.¹

We are, however, in a real world that gave shape (and will still give shape) to the likes of Trumps, Bolsonaros, and Dutertes with all their trolls and minions swarming around and hovering above the rest of us. How do we deal with what many of us would perceive as a situation filled with problematic characters? (Let us hope that we do not miss to take into account the situation that produced them.)

One of my students offered this: “Well, we are dealing with cards and we should make the most of what is dealt to us.” But, should we really just have to make do with what’s in our hands? That would be one Stoic formula: have a good poker face since your cards cannot be changed anyway—otherwise, you’re busted!

While change is necessary during these troubled COVID-19 times, perhaps we could still devote a few pages to some ideas in aid of interpretation about ourselves in relation to our society and culture that have somehow shaped us.

And I hope no one will bash me with the 11th Thesis on Feuerbach.² Thus, below, I present some notes about: how society and culture may shape us; how some sub-cultures may shape ‘others’; how we behave by embodying our own worlds full of models for us to imitate.

¹ Lines from the song “I Dreamed a Dream” from *Les Miserables*.

² Karl Marx wrote: “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” Original German: *Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert; es kommt aber darauf an, sie zu verändern.*

Determination—A Spectrum of Formative Objects

Human beings could not have been born into a world of their choice. This is a determination that all natural beings cannot avoid. In one's world, kinship, biological paternity and maternity are beyond an offspring's personal choice. Also, we cannot choose an ideal world where an Imelda Marcos, or a Francisco Duque III, or a Janet Lim-Napoles or a Mocha Uson should have been born [although there is no assurance that they would also embody that ideal world]; fortunately, some individuals nobler than us were also born into a world that we know today—individuals who are not of dubious qualities, but inspirations and models of life-giving behavior: Oscar Romero, Nelson Mandela, Malala Yousafzai...

So, despite the Trumps and Dutertes around us, it is theoretically possible that we can make our own choice to be with the likes of Romero or Mandela, rather than with the kinds that produce lies, arrogance, rudeness, brazenness and corruption. That is, if one does really have those conditions or opportunities to be in the company of righteous people.

The usual institutions and familiar relationships are simply there, warts and all, before choices. These have all been established even before the subjects have become aware of themselves. Individuals, however, may choose from whatever is possible (like some individuals as friends, or specific work as career, or an inspiring lifestyle as vocation) from their world's feasible sets that provide a continuum of varying components available. In such worlds, individuals get entangled with involvements and socializations—where they would eventually acquire their personal tastes, dispositions, habits, or “second-nature.”³

³ Lyotard refers to the “first-nature humanity” as the indeterminate status of childhood or its residues, and could be

People generally regard their cultural and social standards as guiding and leading them toward something good (even if that good is really, culturally, ambivalent in its direction). They teach children to think and do the same—making possible the imprinting of the myriad cultural and social schemata or scripts in their memories which serve to trigger cues for feeling, thinking, and acting.⁴ When children adapt themselves to these standards it is more likely that they are following tested paths and imitating the behavior of elders; especially those paths certified by their ancestors as their sure ways toward flourishing of life. When they adopt or adapt to a particular pattern of behavior pre-judged as productive or good by many, they have freed themselves from the more meticulous process of examining whether this pattern of behavior is good or not. It is the tendency of individuals to adopt ways that were already there before they were born or follow models who came before them, for better or for worse. These enduring ways have survived and will survive even after individuals die; these common and persistent mimetic behavior is regarded as necessary for survival as well as for social integration.

Wang Lung and O-lan are characters who only knew the possibilities which their traditional Chinese world

branded as “inhuman” by the “second-nature humanity” which refers to the institution-mediated status of adult humanity; but, this “second-nature humanity” is also referred to as the “inhuman” that colonizes and dehumanizes the first-nature humanity. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 1-7.

⁴ What Gagnon and Simon (citing other authors, like Kenneth Burke and to some extent Erving Goffman) have referred to as the cultural, inter-personal and intra-psychic scripting is also relevant to our present discussion. See, John H. Gagnon and William Simon, *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality*, second edition (London/New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 2005), 13ff, 290, 312ff.

could offer and inform them.⁵ Kunta Kinte, before he fell victim to slave traders, could only think of security in the familiar age-old traditions of the Mandinka tribe.⁶ The pursuits and triumphs of Okonkwo have also been clearly cut out for him by the traditional Igbo culture of Nigeria.⁷

Conflicts and struggles are also overlaid by the traditions embodied by many and these would equip individuals to maneuver for their shares of what they think the world offers to people. Mahasweta Devi has illustrated this in her stories about tribal societies in West Bengal.⁸ She tells about a hunting tribe who would “come out of the forest, go to the village market, place honey, leaves, roots, flowers, and silently take away whatever they need: rice, oil, spices.”⁹ They have no concept of money, but the mainstream culture has; they are branded as thieves (“inhuman”?) by the dominant culture’s imposition of commercial rules. The absence of common axis or lines of relationship (kinship, shared worldview, sympathy, etc.) precludes a more promising bond of solidarity between the tribal and mainstream societies. Because of the absence of a common measure between the hunting tribe’s and mainstream culture’s market transactions, bonds indispensable to solidarity or mutual-relations are generally wanting.

The truth is that subjects are helplessly thrown, without them knowing or willing it, into the lap of their parents; and, consequently, into their environment and their world that is full of “things out there” which are

⁵ See Pearl S. Buck, *The Good Earth* (New York: Pocket Books, 1953).

⁶ See Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1976).

⁷ See Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1994).

⁸ Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps* (London/New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

considered necessary objects in the formation of ways of looking, feeling, thinking, acting, or appreciating. Such “things” include knowledge, beliefs, values, speech, language, images, social roles, models of behavior, patterned practices or rituals.

An American born in China could not avoid learning Chinese or using chopsticks; a Filipino born in the Bicol region will most likely become fond of chili peppers and coconut milk; an Ilokano would not dislike eating the edible beetle. These are not conscious choices but largely unconscious and automatic habits, acquired through the usual socializations and cultural dispositions that surround and shape individuals.

The subjects’ parents’ or elders’ world is where they find things that amaze, threaten, surprise, attract, challenge, frustrate, enliven, or stir desires. Passing through various stages of identity development, subjects eventually form part of that world and its effects on consciousness. Subjects unconsciously *and sometimes* consciously apprehend it and make it their own world; even at the expense of losing touch with their personal drives. In some cultures, for example, individuals follow their elders’ choice of marriage partners. Some cultures even prescribe how people should smile or laugh or chew their food or spit their saliva or wipe their face or express satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

It is into the elders’ world where subjects integrate themselves with the rest of other beings; more or less. Infants, therefore, could only follow the procedures which culture-defined idea of maturity or humanity has traditionally prescribed for them. Some cultures define maturity as being more embedded into one’s tribe; others would define it as greater individual differentiation or autonomy. One has to be initiated into every practice that culture has deemed acceptable in the areas of eating, defecating, and even reproducing. In the realm of sex, the

post-partum taboo and the *ius primae noctus* or later *droit du seigneur* used to be norms in some simple societies.¹⁰ Individuals had to conform to such things. To paraphrase Chesterton: Tradition would be the dictatorship of the dead.

There are many objects in the outside world that impact on subjects. From different levels of apprehension or experience, subjects are overwhelmed by their density. Still, depending on one's vulnerability and resistance, such objects eventually spell out the language with which identity can be described.

The Other Formative Objects

There are a variety of “other objects” that can influence or shape individuals into someone else. In a social enclave we can talk about individuals raised into the sort of inter-generational taste and manners. A royal family reproduces and perpetuates its royal taste and manners through royal customs and protocols; a working class clan immortalizes its own workers' taste and manners through its dutiful and loyal progenies.¹¹ It is possible, however, for some individuals coming from a social group to acquire another group's ways, values, or lifestyles—simply because they have also exposed themselves to the latter's “other objects” that gave shape to “other forms of manners”. While some children of prostituted women may become professionals because of their avoidance of pimps and their exposure to some influential social workers and educators, some children of respectable leaders may, because of exposure to “dangerous elements in society”, become delinquents and

¹⁰ See <http://www.snopes.com/weddings/customs/droit.asp/>, accessed July 16, 2007.

¹¹ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984).

later on become influential to a multitude of “other people” themselves.

The objects of the world are comprehended as facts; and as facts, they are important to subjects. But before subjects recognize objects as palpable “something,” such objects have already acted upon them. Being exposed to objects is being exposed to their effects on subjects. One cannot think of being proactive without being “pro-acted” upon by other things.

First, because of the position of objects relative to that of subjects, the latter have conditioned themselves to a certain way of looking. For instance, it is not difficult to see why most people look at the sky (or the symbolic world) as something “up there.” This is because subjects are standing on a ground that is “lower” than the sky. However, if people look at their place and the sky’s position against the background of the whole space called “universe,” then the sky as “up there” and our ground as “below” are no longer determinate spaces. From the multiple indeterminate points in the universe, any place can either be “up there” or “below.”

Second, being in this world means also reproducing the patterns set by the mainstream culture (or by sub-cultures of boors and Fallstaffs). Cultural patterns are there “outside us;” but eventually, also forming “inside us.” This process of internalization or enculturation may be less complicated in the context of simple indigenous tribes of Philippine hinterlands or small barrios dependent on simple farming or fishing; but, not as smooth in more complex urbanized settings where so many cases of “explosive” personalities, multiple identities, or unintegrated individuals appear. The still intact conventional road to internalization of those socio-cultural elements “outside us” is the reason why it is so easy for *most* individuals living in traditional contexts to experience the congruence between their ways of feeling,

thinking, and acting on one hand, with the expectations set before them by a still solid socially-transmitted culture on the other hand.¹² This does not mean, however, that culture is monolithic or that personal attitudes or behavior eternally constant. Neither is the process of internalization that simple; especially when the process of individualization takes place within complex settings.

Third, cultural patterns handed down by previous generations can still be considered “treasure” by *the many*. These are the objects that form an identified heritage—a living repository of what are considered as necessary, valuable, indispensable, or meaningful. They confer/impose important collective traits/behaviors or marks that make or show subjects who they are or who should they be. Many times, these common behavioral traits or customs are forced on subjects like obligations (i.e., quasi-obligatory). Social expectations make a powerful pressure on every subject who is often caught in conformity or forced into submission albeit subconsciously. Social pressure is powerful because they are co-terminous with necessary relationships. They, more or less, lose their power when subjects acquire more external and internal space, thereby, gaining more autonomy, allowing them to become more critical to conventions; saying goodbye to previous dependencies while saying “hello” to new ones. Some successful women from Africa, like the supermodels Iman and Waris Dirie,

¹² In a communication process, the shared physical world as well as the internalized information or world-aspects of culture bring about better understanding among conversation partners. They are said to be in a high-context communication. There is not much need to verbalize through explicit codes what are already embedded in their worlds. On the other hand, two conversation partners who do not share contexts may have to be more explicit with their transmitted codes to bring about greater understanding. The latter are said to be in a low-context communication. See Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1977), p. 91.

have been campaigning against the customary practice of genital mutilation; career women in Shanghai, Dongguan, and Chengdu have more power than their counterparts of ancient China against the traditional practice of husbands keeping concubines.¹³ Mahasweta Devi and Vandana Shiva have enjoyed some prestige and power amidst India's patriarchal and discriminatory customs (versus women and tribals) because of their education and middle class positions.¹⁴

Men and women of every culture cannot avoid being surrounded (or colonized) by the culture into which they are thrown; a culture which is more or less alive with their surviving culture bearers. Even if personal choice is involved, the determining aspects of a living tradition, no matter how weak, will still frame every decision. Thus, some intentions and decisions that are made in connection with economic production or commercial exchange will also be colored by the more generalized influence of culture.

Culture becomes especially more prominent when interactions framed within a local setting are informed by shared beliefs, rituals, and traditional forms of organization. In simple or tribal societies, the congruence between economic production/exchange and the age-old cultural traditions may still be operative. Thus, the strictly rationalized calculated transactions common to urban capitalist settings (cf. fixed prices or quid pro quo transactions) may seem strange to the indigenous Mandaya tribe of Southern Philippines whose shared

¹³ See Don Lee, "Revival of the Concubines Stirs Trouble in China," *Los Angeles Times*, December 4, 2005, in http://www.boston.com/news/world/asia/articles/2005/12/04/revival_of_the_concubines_stirs_trouble_in_china/ accessed August 17, 2007.

¹⁴ Cf. Anees Jung, *Unveiling India: A Woman's Journey* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1988); *Beyond the Courtyard: A Sequel to Unveiling India* (New Delhi: Viking, 2003).

idea of reciprocity or mutual-help informs their practices of exchange. For a Mandaya, it is not a problem that their culture will give a local twist to some capitalist practices. What turns out to be more problematic is when capitalistic interests and means-end rationalization subordinate or suppress a Mandaya's expectations of mutual help or solidarity. Some small-scale commercial transactions may, however, fit into the more traditional/cultural trading patterns which may begin with the seller's assessment of the buyer's capacity to pay and may pass through the haggling stage, and may end with either withdrawal of the buyer or completion of a deal. Hidden in the seller's assessment of a buyer's modest capacity is the appropriate price adjustment based on fellow-feeling and not strictly based on business. This regard for the other's lowly status is generously allowed by the tradition of *pakikipagkapwa* (fellow-feeling); fixed-price scheme will only allow it in the presence of an explicit rational or calculative justification (for "on sale", defective, or promotional items).

Subordination of *Pakikipagkapwa* Tradition: Formation's Misfortune

Culture does figure out in the fields of politics or political games. Where different personalities struggle for places and positions, cultural elements may still be identified. These elements, as cultural capital, are pursued by well-meaning civil servants or by opportunists who seek for external goods¹⁵ such as honor,

¹⁵ For the interior and exterior goods classification, see Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. "MacIntyre believes that politics should be a practice with internal goods, but as it is now it only leads to external goods. Some win, others lose; there is no good achieved that is good for the whole community; cheating and exploitation are frequent, and this damages the community as a whole. (MacIntyre has changed his

prestige, and recognition. Children, especially in the early years of formation, are *like* sponges, absorbing much information around them, especially those coming from the significant others,¹⁶ models, and social media's so-called "influencers". When elders manipulate objects or values to suit their interests, these do not escape the attention of young learners whose minds are exceptionally impressionable.¹⁷ Later on, they will make sense of these learning experiences, for better or for worse.

When a complex system of state-management practices and their organizing rules puts pressure on a whole society, it could subordinate or curtail the influence of *pakikipagkapwa* traditions (with their manifold rituals and practices included) which function in consolidating and enlivening a people (cf. the non-commercial healings performed by native healers-moral teachers who are branded as "quacks"). In urbanized capitalist settings which are, in general, more secularized than many traditional settings, the people's attitudes and behavior will not be predominantly marked by the traditions of simple societies. Instead, they are influenced by the processes of liberal-capitalism (embodied by profit-makers/takers) which consistently revolve around the structures of private ownership,

terminology since *After Virtue*. He now calls internal goods "goods of excellence," and external goods are now called "goods of effectiveness.") "Political Philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://iep.utm.edu/p-macint/> (accessed 4 August 2020)

¹⁶ See, Lavinia Gomez, *An Introduction to Object Relations Theory* (London: Free Association Press, 1997).

¹⁷ Albert Bandura and D. McClelland, *Social Learning Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977); see, Seok Hyun Gwon and Suyong Jeong, "Concept Analysis of Impressionability Among Adolescents and Young Adults," *NursingOpen*, 5/4 (October 2018): 601-610.

profit-making, and remunerated work. Thus, the customary *pakikipagkawa* community work based on *bayanihan*¹⁸ does not figure out in the bureaucrat-capitalists' plans and corporate management styles. Similarly, the sharing of food among neighbors in rural areas could not be practiced by owners of restaurants or fast food outlets where cash is always required. Some people, however, may share their resources with *their friends* while they are in those cash-demanding fields.

Of multitudes, capitalistic market-economic structures have configured everyday life and have transformed societies as centers of production, commerce, and spending/consumption. It is not altogether an anomalous claim to speak of a "capitalist culture" which has gained some ascendancy and regularity, learned and shared by peoples as workers and consumers, handed down from one generation to the next generation, and quasi-obligatory to everyone who is integrated into the system. It is in this pervasive sense that the dominant male-instituted capitalist culture penetrates every personal process or project of integration; especially as more and more persons and environments are shaped by the requirements of capitalist work and market exchange (and consequently reproduce a capitalist culture). This will happen when a uni-dimensional market-economic system subordinates or colonizes complex lifeworlds; and, in the process, attains preeminence over the broader and more integrative cultural systems. Transformed according to the efficiency-expectations of utilitarian or means-end reasoning, the physical world will showcase fields or areas that exponentially multiply instrumental or quid pro quo relations. The use and exertion of

¹⁸ *Bayanihan* is a combination of two words, *bayan* (nation or town) and *anihan* (harvest)—it means neighbourhood work or community work done voluntarily and without monetary compensation.

knowledge and information to normalize relations also characterize present-day social processes. Political power nowadays is said to be characterized by its use of knowledge/power. Legislations that serve to create some “desirable” dispositions in citizens would follow the paths established by power/knowledge.¹⁹

A senior citizen who is visibly suffering from a debilitating illness has handed a doctor’s prescription to one of the store attendants in one of the Mercury Drug Store outlets in Marikina City. The store attendant informs the senior buyer that the latter could not avail himself of the senior-citizens’ discount since the prescription note did not bear the name of the patient. The poor man explodes with expletives against the strict application of the formal requirements of commerce and the law. With his trembling body and his contorted face revealing pain, he holds on to the shoulders of the other buyers, walks away slowly and leaves the store, extremely disappointed and furious over the subordination of fellow-feeling under the drug-store’s observance of the formal requirements of commerce founded on laws or science.

Conclusion

Young individuals’ or learners’ encounters with others are not only about meeting people but also about exposure to other “objects” that go with such encounters, like social predispositions toward everyday civil formality, pursuit of goods considered as shared sources of prestige, confusing notions of right or wrong, or the

¹⁹ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1977); Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, “Intellectuals and Power,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by D.F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 205-216.

banality of indecency and corruption. There is no assurance that automatic help will flow from among the bystanders when someone falls flat on the ground, half-dead or half-alive. Impressionable characters are shaped when exposed to such encounters which are reproductions of what have been learned by grown-ups.

Even the private aspects of people's lives, like intimacy and sexual orientation, are framed by culture or a capitalist "culture." Culture, no matter how complex it becomes, is always that "web" (or complex of webs), or "canopy," or "cage," or "conscience," or "resource," configuring, to a great degree, every thought one produces, every affect one invests, or every decision one makes. This also takes for granted the complexity and variety of forms or dimensions of socio-cultural determinations—including the culture behind today's populism/s that have risen against the claims, posturing, inconsistencies, and contradictions of mainstream or elitist education, religion, economics, and politics.

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