

WHAT IF: COVID-19 in the Philippines in the Light of the Catholic Social Tradition

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has been a significant challenge to governments all over the world. In many ways, it has exposed the weaknesses of the Philippine government and its structures. While the government rightly imposed a lockdown on its people, it resulted in the marginalization of the poor. If only government policies and programs were informed by the Catholic social tradition, the government would be in a better position of truly being at the service of its people. The crisis presents a unique opportunity to the government to rethink of its structures and projects that would enable it to contribute to the formation of communities that foster human dignity and development.

Keywords: Catholic Social Tradition, Church, COVID-19, Duterte, Field Hospital, Lockdown, Philippines.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has arguably been the worst pandemic in recent history and has severely disrupted the lives of people all over the world. It has infected millions of people and has caused thousands of deaths. What makes COVID-19 alarming are the facts that there is no vaccine for it (yet) and that there is not any scientifically tested and proven medicine for it. The hospital systems of many countries, such as the United States and Italy, are severely stretched and tested. Who would have thought that the metaphor, *field hospital*, which is often used by Pope Francis to refer to the church, would become a part of contemporary

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vocabulary as various countries scramble to construct field hospitals in order to accommodate the burgeoning number of people who are ill of COVID-19?

In this paper, I present an assessment of the Philippine government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the light of the Catholic social tradition. In the first part, I present a narrative of how the Philippine government has responded so far to the pandemic, highlighting their main contours. It is followed in the second part with a critique of the government's apparent lack of preparedness in responding the crisis. In the third and final part, I will highlight the possible effects of the Catholic social tradition in dealing with the pandemic if only those teachings inform and guide the government's decisions and actions. The silver-lining of the present crisis, if there is one, is that it presents an opportunity for new ways of looking at and building our society and of being church that are truly liberative and life-giving.

2. The Government's Response to the Pandemic

In response to the spread of COVID-19 and the thousands of confirmed cases at that time, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as "Public Health Emergency of International Concern" (PHEIC) on 30 January 2020. In the Philippines, the Department of Health (DOH) confirmed the first case of COVID-19, that of a Chinese tourist, on 30 January 2020 (WHO, "Coronavirus Disease"). The first known death outside China, also a Chinese national, occurred in the Philippines on 1 February 2020. After the localized transmission of COVID-19 was reported by the DOH, President Rodrigo Duterte declared a state of public emergency in the country on 8 March 2020, a move that was meant to enable government units and agencies to respond appropriately to the threat of the coronavirus.

As part of his initial response to COVID-19, Duterte first suspended classes in all levels in Metro Manila from 10-14 March 2020 and later on, imposed quarantine in the metropolis as a means of "protecting and defending" the people from the pandemic (GMA News, "COVID-19 Community Quarantine"). It came into effect on 15 March 2020 and lasted until 14 April 2020.

During this period, travel restrictions were imposed. Nevertheless, the movement of goods to and from Metro Manila was still allowed. Checkpoints, manned by the police and backed by the military, were set up in all the entry points of the region to make sure that the people followed the government's stay-at-home order. Curfew was also imposed from 8 pm to 5 am. The lockdown effectively extended the suspension of classes, compelling educational institutions to utilize e-learning. Mass public transportation was also suspended, including trains, buses, jeepneys and tricycles.

On 16 March 2020, a day after the start of the lockdown in Metro Manila, Duterte declared "a state of calamity" throughout the Philippines for a period of six months which included the imposition of an "Enhanced Community Quarantine" (ECQ) throughout Luzon that lasted until 12 April 2020. In doing so, he expanded the quarantine to basically half of the population of the country. The declaration put a price control on basic goods and services, the distribution of the government's calamity fund, and the authorization of importation and receipt of donations (Official Gazette, "Dagling Paliwanag"). The government's economic managers also announced a ₱27.1 billion (around US\$ 533.3 million) package in response to COVID-19, ₱3.1 billion of which is meant to purchase coronavirus test kits. In a statement, the country's Department of Finance Secretary Carlos Dominguez III said,

As directed by President Duterte, the government will provide targeted and direct programs to guarantee that benefits will go to our workers and other affected sectors. We have enough but limited resources, so our job is to make sure that we have sufficient funds for programs mitigating the adverse effects of COVID-19 on our economy (CNN Philippines Staff, "Government Rolls Out").

However, the government was characterized as 'deceitful' in unveiling the supposed government support

since the Php14 billion allocation identified by government's economic managers as support for tourism, supposedly being the sector most affected by the COVID-19 threat, is actually

part of Tourism Infrastructure and Enterprise Zone Authority (TIEZA) funds for big-ticket infrastructure projects. Most of these were already allocated even before the pandemic hit the country (IBON Media).

As a means of containing the effects of COVID-19, mobilizing the necessary assistance to those families affected by the ECQ, preventing the overburdening of the healthcare system, providing the necessary healthcare to COVID-19 patients, undertaking a program of recovery and rehabilitation, and providing the necessary funds for such efforts, the Congress of the Philippines passed Republic Act No. 11469, “Bayanihan to Heal as One Act,” on 23 March 2020, which Duterte signed into law the following day (Official Gazette, “Republic Act No. 11469”).¹ Among other provisions, it grants the president the power to “[p]rovide an emergency subsidy to around eighteen (18) million low income households” from five to eight thousand pesos per month for two months based on the present regional minimum wage rate, and the amount of the conditional cash transfer and rice subsidy that such households already receive (Sec. 4c). It also authorizes the President to expedite the procurement of necessary medical supplies and equipment (Sec. 4k), and to “reprogram, reallocate and realign” from the savings and utilized budget of the government (RA 11469, Sec. 4k). With this law, the government is enabled to allocate ₱270 billion to respond to the pandemic. However, Duterte has sought for more funds since he did not think, rightly so, that the original amount is enough to respond to the pandemic (Esguerra).² On 7 April 2020, upon the recommendation of the COVID-19 Inter-Agency Task Force of the

¹Hereafter, RA 11469.

²Duterte’s assertion is not surprising given that the Socioeconomic Planning Secretary, Ernesto Pernia, said in an interview that a Filipino family of five needs ₱42,000 per month in order to survive, an amount that is much more than what the government has allocated in “Bayanihan to Heal as One Act” (Philippine Star, “NEDA: Family of 5 Needs P42,000”). Take note that the government has pegged the poverty threshold at ₱10,481 per month in the first month of 2018 (Lopez), less than a quarter of the survival amount.

government, Duterte extended the lockdown of Luzon, including Metro Manila, until 30 April 2020. Because of the absence of mass testing and the backlogs in the release of test results, the government and health officials do not really know the full extent of the prevalence of the virus. According to the DOH, the government intended to start the mass testing of suspected COVID-19 cases and high-risk individuals on 14 April 2020, the original end date of the quarantine period in Metro Manila (Peralta). On 14 April 2020, the government has also set aside a ₱50.8-billion wage subsidy program for workers at micro, small and medium enterprises (Aurelio).

3. Issues and Problems about the Government's Response

A factor that has affected the government's response and the people's cooperation with the government is President Duterte's statements about and attitude toward the pandemic itself.³ On 6 April 2020, he claimed that he warned the people about the threat of COVID-19 from the very beginning (Tomacruz). That, however, is patently false; he, actually, downplayed its effects and peddled misinformation. In a media interview on 3 February 2020, he said, "Let's start with the narratives by saying that everything is well in the country. There is nothing really to be extra scared of that coronavirus thing although it has affected a lot of countries but in ... You know one or two in any country is not really that fearsome"(Presidential Communications Operations Office, "Media Interview").⁴ He even went on to claim, "*Kagaya ng* (Like) SARS, I assure you even without the vaccines it will just die a natural death. Apparently, *itong mga ganito, mga virus, ano 'to HIV, wala – nawala na. Meron, kokonti na lang* (viruses like this, like HIV, it's gone, there are only a few cases now)" (PCOO, "Media Interview") – a statement, which is scientifically inaccurate, to say the least. In a 10 February 2020 speech, while he claimed that the government was prepared to handle the public health emergency, he said in his typical machismo style, "*Alam*

³See for example, Rappler, "FALSE: Duterte Warned about Coronavirus Threat."

⁴Hereafter, PCOO.

mo, kung hindi natin kaya itong putang-inang idioto na corona ito, hinahanap ko eh. Gusto kong sampalin ang gago. (You know, if we can't defeat this son of a bitch, idiot coronavirus, I've been looking for it, I want to slap the idiot.) We are a nation" (PCOO, "Speech of President"). At the beginning of the pandemic he said that the government had the money to deal with the issue, only for him to backtrack later and say truthfully that the government did not have the necessary financial resources to deal with it in an appropriate manner. Since he enjoys a very high trust and popularity rating among the people, one can just imagine the effects of his statements in terms of people's response to the health crisis.

Since the start of the lockdown, Philippine government and health officials have emphasized to Filipinos the necessity of staying at home, the regular washing of hands with soap and water, the cleaning and disinfection of one's home and environment, and social distancing as means of protecting oneself and others from the coronavirus. The government has also shut-down the mass public transportation system, which while inefficient in many respects, is the primary means of travel of most people in Metro Manila and in the rest of the country. In addition, essential services and businesses are the only ones that the government has allowed to remain open, e.g. markets and groceries, banking, and of course, health services. The lockdown has basically put a stop to the work of the poor who are in the informal sector or the underground economy.

While the imposition of the ECQ is a medical necessity, it is apparent that the government has failed to consider the plight of the poor as regards such measures. For instance, while staying at home lessens one's chances of contracting the virus, and/or assuming one is unknowingly infected with it, of giving it to others, most of the poor who are daily wage earners, in a "no work, no pay" situation, can ill afford not to work at all. Since it is more likely than not that they only receive the legal minimum wage, they will also not have any kind of savings that will tide them over in a moment of crisis. Such workers are put in a conundrum – if they stay at home, it will mean not being able to

provide for themselves and their family but if they go out, it will mean endangering their own or another person's health. Moreover, in the slum areas of Metro Manila, there is less opportunity for the people to have regular access to water and soap with which they could clean their hands. One only needs to go around informal settlements to realize that hygiene and sanitation are not prioritized. In addition, while people realize the importance of social distancing, it is not practical in a densely populated area. As many as five families in the slums would live in a space that is only as big as a regular-sized classroom.

The first day of the lockdown's implementation was chaotic. There was basically a mass gathering of people trying to enter Metro Manila at various check points that were manned by police and the military. The check points unintentionally became choke points. In reaction to the apparent disregard of government guidelines to stay at home, certain local celebrities used the social media to criticize workers for seemingly disobeying quarantine regulations (Madarang). For example, one of them posted in Instagram while watching in TV the arrest of workers for violating the quarantine provisions: "God, why don't you motherf***** just stay at home? Stay at home! Don't you guys get it? *Tigas ng ulo*. [Hard-headed.] This is exactly why they need the military because you f***** won't stay at home. Guys, come on." Other celebrities posted the following, "To those who are complaining about the quarantine period and curfews, just remember that your grandparents were called to war; you are being called to sit on the couch and watch Netflix. You can do this." What these celebrities fail to realize was that they spoke from a privileged position. They universalized their situation in life and wrongly assumed that what is true for them is also true for others. As Cupin justly states in defence of those who are in the streets to earn a living,

Trust me, NOBODY wants to be out and about when there's a pandemic. NOBODY. But they're out there why? Because they need to. Because they will then literally have to choose between death by hunger or death by the coronavirus. What choice is that, you say? Exactly.

As many others have correctly pointed out, social distancing is a privilege. Charles Blow wrote in the *New York Times*:

Such is the life of the working poor, or those slightly above poverty, but still struggling. Our entire discussion around this virus is stained with economic elitism. In social media commentary about images of packed buses and crowds of delivery workers outside restaurants, people chastise black and brown people for not always being inside, but many of those doing the chastising do so from comfortable homes with sufficient money and food.

People can't empathize with what it truly means to be poor in this country, to live in a too-small space with too many people, to not have enough money to buy food for a long duration or anywhere to store it if they did. People don't know what it's like to live in a food desert where fresh fruit and vegetables are unavailable and nutrient-deficient junk food is cheap and exists in abundance.

What is true for the "black and brown people" in the US is also true for Juan or Juana de la Cruz, the ordinary Filipino. Sadly, the celebrities who live in their own bubble fail to see that the social structures which have enabled and kept them in a privileged position are basically the same structures that have kept the poor impoverished and powerless in various ways. What compounds the situation is the conviction of many of those who are privileged that the poor are poor because they are lazy, as if poverty is a choice. But as Lasco, aptly puts it,

Given what we know, ... we should no longer be debating the notion that people are poor because they are lazy. Indeed, the real question we must ask is why, despite people's hard and precarious work, they remain stuck in unacceptable poverty while, despite their incompetence and indifference, many of our politicians wallow in unacceptable wealth.

What adds insult to injury, so to speak, is the fact that while the government has justifiably imposed a lockdown, it did not act in a timely manner, did not have detailed guidelines on how to go about it and did not provide the proper safety nets for those who would be most severely affected by it. Philippine government

officials claimed that they were the first to impose a lockdown among the world's nations and that they acted promptly.⁵ However, the Philippines is not the first country in the world to impose a lockdown. Moreover, as early as the middle of January 2020, there were already calls to ban flights from China. It was only on 31 January 2020 that the government imposed a travel ban on Chinese nationals from Hubei and other provinces with COVID-19 cases in China. Unfortunately, the Chinese national with the first COVID-19 case in the country arrived from Wuhan, the epicentre of the pandemic, on 21 January 2020. Moreover, the Philippine government was dependent on the information provided by the Chinese government as regards the places in China which have cases of the coronavirus. The government could have acted out of caution to ban all flights from China at much earlier; yet it seemed that the Duterte administration was more concerned about its relationship with China (Cepeda). Duterte himself said to ban flights from China "would not be fair" (Philippine Daily Inquirer). Interestingly, the reasons given by Philippine government officials do not refer to scientific studies as regards the effectiveness of travel restrictions. Ironically, concerned that a second wave of coronavirus might be triggered, China banned the entry of all foreigners and halted almost all international flights (Bradsher).

Being a developing country, the Philippine government is from the outset hampered in its efforts to adequately respond to the consequences of the lockdown it imposed on the people. However, it could be faulted in its failure to provide clear guidelines to those affected by the quarantine and to those who would be implement it. For instance, a problem that surfaced at the beginning, which was foreseeable, was that in suspending mass public transportation, many healthcare frontlines did not have the necessary means of transportation to go to hospitals and health centres where they were needed the most. It was only later

⁵For a timeline of the government's response to COVID-19, see Philippine Star, "Philippines Early to Adopt Travel Ban, Lockdown but Not First to Do So."

that the government enacted measures to address the situation. Moreover, as seen in the previous section, it appears that the government was so slow in crafting the necessary safety nets for those who would be adversely affected by the consequent slowdown of the economy. The “Bayanihan Act to Heal as One” which is meant to ameliorate the condition of the poor became a law more than a week after into the lockdown. While it is true that it is not easy to come up with relevant programs, the least the administration could have done is to assure the people from the start that it was aware of the impact of the measures it was imposing and that it was developing plans that addressed the consequences. In this regard, the government was dismal in the performance. It is no wonder that the topic #OustDuterte trended in Twitter because of the government’s apparent lackadaisical response to the pandemic (Esguerra). While it is true that the Philippine government is faced with the worst public health crisis in the country’s history, the government could have prepared more appropriately to it. The pandemic, which is a national security matter, could have been better managed, given the fact that the Office of the President has billions of pesos of confidential intelligence funds in its disposal, apart from the intelligence funds of other government institutions, like the police and the military.

Due to the increase of COVID-19 infections and deaths in the world, Tedros Adhamon Ghebreyesus, the director-general of the WHO, emphasized the need for testing:

... the most effective way to prevent infections and save lives is breaking the chains of transmission. And to do that, you must test and isolate.

You cannot fight a fire blindfolded. And we cannot stop this pandemic if we don’t know who is infected.

We have a simple message for all countries: test, test, test.

Test every suspected case.

If they test positive, isolate them and find out who they have been in close contact with up to 2 days before they developed symptoms, and test those people too. (WHO, “WHO Director-General’s Opening Remarks”)

Nevertheless, the WHO is aware that countries differ in their capacity to perform mass testing so prioritization must be implemented in performing tests. As of 17 April 2020, 12:00 am, 56,048 have been tested nationwide (DOH, "COVID-19 Tracker"). The Philippine government aims to conduct 10,000 tests daily, a major obstacle to which is that there are only 15 laboratories that can conduct COVID-19 tests (ABS-CBN News). For a long time, the Philippines only had one accredited testing centre, the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine (RIMT), which conducted about 250 tests per day. Prior to the RIMT's accreditation, the Philippines still had to send the test samples to Australia for confirmation.

Given the government's limited resources, the DOH protocol about COVID-19 testing focuses on "all individuals who are at risk... This includes the following groups: (1) suspect cases or (2) individuals with relevant history of travel and exposure (or contact), whether symptomatic or asymptomatic, and (3) health care workers with possible exposure, whether symptomatic or asymptomatic" (DOH, "Interim Guidelines"). It must be noted that in the DOH's "algorithm for triage of patients with possible COVID-19 infection"(DOH, "Algorithm for Triage Patients) of 10 March 2020, persons who do not have symptoms but have "appropriate exposure" (DOH Announcement)⁶ to a confirmed COVID-19 individual, must undergo 14 days of home quarantine for monitoring (Malasig). Such persons do not need to be tested. A controversy erupted about who gets tested since it was reported that certain politicians were examined although they were asymptomatic. The DOH itself denied that it accorded VIP treatment to politicians: "The DOH assures the public that there is no policy for VIP treatment and that all specimens are being processed on a first-in, first-out basis with courtesy accorded to officials holding positions of national security and public health" (Tan). Despite the DOH's denial, it would appear that certain politicians who did not hold positions of "national security and

⁶By this term is meant a close proximity of having interacted with the person, in the same space (household or office).

public health” were tested in violation of the department’s own protocols (Robles). The actions of those politicians were an abuse of their political positions.

4. A Theological Critique of the Government’s Response

The ECQ is revelatory of the weaknesses of the Philippine economic, political and health systems. The Duterte administration has basically continued the neoliberal policies of previous administrations, a system that has been criticized by Pope Francis (*Evangelii Gaudium* 53-54). In such a system, free market competition reigns supreme and the rights of workers are not prioritized. With the economy practically grinding to a halt because of the ECQ, the government is faced with the task of providing for workers who suddenly find themselves out of work, those who are in the informal economy, and the hospitalization needs of the ordinary Filipino who are confirmed to have contracted COVID-19. If only the economic system has given more emphasis on the rights of workers to a just wage and to job security, and to social welfare, all of which are emphasized in the Catholic social tradition, the government would not be in a bind where it finds itself at present. If only workers receive a just wage, they will have more resources to provide for their needs and not be dependent on government hand-out. Yet, there is a big disparity between the government-mandated minimum wage and the just wage that would enable workers and their families to live decently. As John Paul II argued, “in every case, a just wage is the concrete means of *verifying the justice* of the whole socioeconomic system and, in any case, of checking that it is functioning justly. It is not the only means of checking, but it is a particularly important one and, in a sense, the key means” (*Laborem Exercens* 19). He also states in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*,

It is a strict duty of justice and truth not to allow fundamental human needs to remain unsatisfied, and not to allow those burdened by such needs to perish. It is also necessary to help these needy people to acquire expertise, to enter the circle of exchange, and to develop their skills in order to make the best use of their capacities and resources. Even prior to the logic of

a fair exchange of goods and the forms of justice appropriate to it, there exists something which is due to man [sic] because he is man, by reason of his lofty dignity. Inseparable from that required "something" is the possibility to survive and, at the same time, to make an active contribution to the common good of humanity (34).

Aware that the government has been wanting in its response to the pandemic, the private sector has significantly stepped up in contributing to the needs of the poor. According to CNN Philippines, private companies and institutions have contributed and pledged more than ₱6 billion, a "figure does not include other in-kind donations made by more private firms such as PPE [personal protective equipment], food and water supplies, hygiene kits, and COVID-19 test kits directly delivered to frontliners" (Lopez). Church groups have also contributed significantly responding to the COVID-19 crisis. For example, the Baclaran Church, run by the Redemptorists, in its "Operation Laging Saklolo" has been actively engaged in providing food for medical health workers and frontliners and relief goods for the poor and street families (Baclaran Church). Caritas Manila, a Catholic NGO, has distributed more than ₱1.367 billion worth of gift certificates to more than 5.445 million poor families in the greater Metro Manila area (Caritas Manila). The Vincentians, a society of apostolic life, are also actively involved in providing relief goods to the poor (Vincent Helps). Catholic universities in Metro Manila have also opened their doors to provide accommodation to healthcare professionals. These efforts are encouraging signs of the solidarity with those who are most affected by the crisis, a key social virtue which recognizes that each person is the other person's keeper, "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all" (John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 38).

As regards the Philippine political system, the issues that were identified by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines in its "Pastoral Exhortation on Philippine Politics," written more than 20 years ago, appear to still characterize the Philippine

political landscape. The country now has a populist president who has enjoyed high popularity rating survey after survey in spite of the many statements of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) against the excesses of his administration and policies, particularly his "war on drugs."⁷ At a time, when the government is arguably inefficient in its response to the pandemic, "[p]olitics must become an effective means for integral development for all rather than a tool for the advancement of a privileged few" (CBCP, "Philippine Politics"). For the country to have a vibrant political discourse that is at the service of the common good, the right of people to criticize government (in)actions must always be upheld. While people rightly call for unity at this time, it must not mean silence in the face of incompetence and be at the expense of social justice. Political leaders cannot afford to be complacent while ordinary people suffer because of the pandemic, and the lockdown and its consequences. How the country's national and local political leaders have responded to COVID-19 serve as reminders of and evidence for the need to elect competent and qualified leaders who pursue the common good, defend and promote social justice, are inspired and guided by the spirit of service, are imbued with a preference for the poor and who consider empowerment of the people as a goal of political activity (CBCP, "Philippine Politics").

While there have been improvements in the Philippine healthcare system, like the increase in budget annually and the passage of the Universal Health Care Act (Official Gazette, Republic Act No. 11223), the present pandemic has severely taxed the system and has exposed the need for more facilities, a higher budget and additional human power (Tantuco).⁸ For instance,

⁷For example, see Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, "Lord Heal Our Land" and "Rejoice and Be Glad!" It seems that despite its good intentions and reasonable political statements, the Philippine hierarchy has a credibility problem when it comes to political participation. Even among the clergy, there is a deep ideological divide.

⁸For a comprehensive discussion of the Philippine healthcare system, see Manuel M. Dayrit, et al. For an assessment of the Philippine healthcare system vis-à-vis COVID-19, see Lim.

several major Metro Manila hospitals by 24 March 2020 were no longer able to admit more COVID-19 patients (Merez). Fortunately, the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation, the government agency charged with implementing the national health insurance program, will cover a significant, if not the entire, amount of the hospitalization costs of COVID-19 patients (Philippine Health Insurance Corporation). If the government is really serious about people's right to health as it is enshrined in the Philippine constitution and as found in the Catholic social tradition (John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* 11), the government would have allotted a bigger budget to the DOH, hired more healthcare professionals and would have enough hospital facilities and the necessary equipment to respond to the crisis.

The lockdown has substantially slowed down the economic sector, but it is the poor who have borne the brunt of the crisis. As we have seen above, the government has been slow in coming up with the appropriate social amelioration program that would tide over the poor during the quarantine period. So while the Philippine church's leadership has repeatedly called on the entire church and the government to privilege the poor in their policies and programs, it would appear that they were an insignificant factor in the decision making processes of those who are in the corridors of power. There is no question that there was a medical urgency to impose the quarantine but whether government policy makers raised the question of its effects on the poor is another matter.

It would be a wasted opportunity if the country's politicians and economic policy makers would simply pick up where the economy left off in a post-COVID-19 world. The pandemic has confirmed Pope Francis' criticism of the existing system as an "economy of exclusion" in which money is idolized and in which the financial system rules rather than serves (*Evangelii Gaudium* 53-58). In a country in which 20% of the population live below the government-determined poverty threshold, it is scandalous and unconscionable that there are 15 Filipino billionaires (Lopez, "Manny Villar"). Without question, there is a need for an economic model in which profit is not at the center of economic

activity and in which the good of each and every person is prioritized. Such a system seeks the development of each person and the whole person (Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* 14). The present context calls for the development of an economic model in which the poor are prioritized, consulted, and empowered. It is critical that they are not merely at the receiving end of decisions that others – the powerful and the privileged in society – make for them but that they are the “artisans of their destiny” (Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* 65). While the donation of private business companies and business individuals is commendable, an ethical economy will be one in which the very condition that necessitates charity will be eradicated and will have the common good as its goal. The “economy for the common good” will definitely be a much better alternative than the status quo (Economy for the Common Good). In this model, for instance, the following questions are asked to measure the bottom line:

- Do products and services satisfy human needs?
- How humane are working conditions?
- How environmentally friendly are production processes?
- How ethical is the sales and purchasing policy?
- How are profits distributed?
- Do women receive equal pay for equal work?
- To what extent are employees involved in core, strategic decision making? (Felber and Hagelberg)

A change in economic model demands political reform as well. It is thus conceivable that there will be resistance from those who benefit from the present system. There will be a push back from the economic and political elite if ever there are initiatives that threaten their privileges and power even though those changes are necessary for the common good. Nevertheless, the work for social justice demands that the system be transformed – even if only one step at a time.

5. Conclusion

Just like any other crisis, the pandemic presents the Philippine government and its people with the opportunity to rethink its political, economic and health systems. If there is one good thing

that can come out of this crisis, it will be the re-orientation of society's systems so that they will truly be at the service of the people and promote the common good. The present crisis shows that the status quo needs changing and improvement if its structures and systems are to promote integral human development. It cannot simply be business as usual after the pandemic. It also cannot simply be a matter of giving money to the poor since that will not effect the much needed change but dole-outs may even perpetuate the dependence of the poor on the powerful and make them more vulnerable to their interests. The whole country is challenged to come up with an economic blueprint that does not merely continue the policies of old but one that is truly "at the service of human freedom in its totality" (John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* 42). If we let the principles of the Catholic social tradition transform "[hu]mankind's criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation" (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 19), then, we are already beginning the long and arduous journey of transforming the world.

The Philippine situation is by no means unique. It is symptomatic of the world's economic order which emphasizes free trade and profit but is not concerned with its implications for the poor. Other countries have also experienced in their own ways the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and have realized the shortcomings of their own systems. This will be particularly true for developing countries but in various ways, the dysfunctionality of the various systems is also manifested in industrialized countries. For example, the lockdown in the USA has resulted to the unemployment of millions of Americans. One can just imagine the difficulties involved in addressing this issue and its attendant consequences. The efforts to reform the world order so that it will be sustainable will necessitate the collaboration of all nations and will obviously be not easy.

The present lockdown also shows the church that while the liturgy is important in its life, there is much more to being a community of disciples. In so many ways, the lockdown has

unintentionally made the church question what it means to engage in mission and in the process, has made the church become more like the field hospital that Pope Francis envisions it to become. In many, if not most, parishes in the Philippines, a significant part of the church's resources and personnel are focused on the administration of the sacraments. But now that mass gatherings are banned, the different parishes have had to conceive of mission and ministry in other ways. While parishes stream Eucharistic celebrations online, they also have had to minister to their parishioners who have been adversely affected by the lockdown. In a way, the lockdown has affirmed the mission of many of the laity as they involve themselves in ways that are not parish-based as they respond to meet the needs of the community, e.g. the creation and donation of PPE equipment to medical frontliners. Furthermore, the church can do its part in helping the government be true to its mandate as it speaks truth to power. As a community of believers, it will do well to strive for the formation of communities that are consciously engaged in the task of nation-building in which the full dignity and rights of each and every human person are recognized and promoted and in which genuine solidarity exists.

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