

Religious Formation in the Time of Covid-19 and Beyond

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Abstract

Coronavirus disease (Covid- 19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. The present virus, Covid-19 has affected humanity in many ways, and every aspect of our life, like psychologically, socially, politically, economically, health, education, and religion. The formation is a demanding ministry for those who take it seriously. It was all the more demanding to the formators during this time of the Covid-19 and the national locked down. As we the formators help the formees to grow closer to Christ and become effective men and women of God to spread the love of Christ let us also become responsibly sensitive and resilient and give hope to others during this difficult time of the pandemic Covid-19.

Keywords: Formation, Formees, Covid-19, Christocentric Formation

Introduction

Coronavirus disease (Covid- 19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. Most people infected with the Covid-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illness. The Covid-19 virus spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs

or sneezes. The disease has spread the entire world except for a few countries, as it is claimed, but they are not proved beyond doubt. The statistics on the spread of this pandemic are a shocking revelation to us that any amount of planning, preparation, or economic and social development to save humanity is inadequate. A small virus-like this has exposed the human being's vulnerability and helplessness. Many countries have started experimenting with a vaccine to treat this virus but so far not many have come up with a vaccine that is approved by the World Health Organization. At the same time, countries are claiming to have discovered a vaccine and the clinical test is in progress. The media, electronic, and print are updating the public on the necessity of following the protocol like social distancing, personal hygiene like washing hands frequently and using sanitizer while interacting in public life to control the spread of the pandemic. Central, state, and local government machinery in India have been working hard to contain the spread of the virus.

Human civilization has seen many pandemics, originating in different countries and spreading indiscriminately throughout the world and Covid-19 is one such pandemic. A peep into the history of pandemic reveals that human beings were the victims of many of them. The pre-historic epidemic affected people in circa 3000 BC. Then on there are records of many viruses that affected the human race like the plague of Athens (430 BC), Black Death (1346-1353), American Plague (16th C), and Spanish Flue is one of the worst-hit pandemics at the beginning of the twentieth century(1918-1920). In the modern age, there were outbreaks like AIDS, H1N1, Ebola, and Zika virus. Even now there is no medicine for some viruses though some of the pandemics were brought under control.

The present virus, Covid-19 has affected humanity in many ways, and every aspect of our life, like psychologically, socially, politically, economically, health, education, and religion. This article is an attempt to explore how this pandemic has affected us in the above-mentioned areas and the Priestly and Religious formation of men and women and see what we have learned from this crisis for the future of religious formation. A crisis of this kind is an opportunity for us to look at reality from different perspectives. This time of pandemic and locked down has forced people in religious formation to look at formation in a new way. It has affected Priests and religious, men and women in areas of prayer life, community life, ministry, mental and physical health,

and social life. Therefore, the formation in and for the future should prepare the formees to be familiar with the new normal.

Impact of Covid - 19 on Humanity

The Covid-19 virus has affected nearly the entire world, men, women, children, and old people, though a few countries claim that they haven't had any disputable case. According to WHO's report as of in mid-October 2020 the confirmed cases crossed 36.5 million and out of which casualties are over one million worldwide and the number is increasing day after day in many countries. As the active cases increase the virus has affected all aspects of human life. The impacts of the Covid-19 virus on people in many countries are varying in degrees but it has impacted the Society, Economy, Health, Economic, Psychology, Education, and Religious Expression and Practices. The following paragraphs will contain some explanation on the above-mentioned topics for a better understanding of the situation we are in during this pandemic.

Impact on Society

Society is a group of people involved in persistent social interaction, or a large social group sharing the same spatial or social territory. COVID-19 has affected the society in which we live in so many ways than one. It has restricted the interaction between people which is a common feature of any society. Keeping distance among people was necessary to check the spread of the virus. That distancing did not spare the old, the young, the invalid, and the others who need proximity with caregivers due to their conditions. Those who contracted the virus were asked to go on quarantine either institutional or home to prevent other people from getting the virus. The very exercise of going for quarantine was intimidating for many but it had to be done for the greater good of the people at large. In some cases, the family members were separated from one another, children were taken away to isolation and quarantine which left the mothers and other primary caregivers traumatized. The spread of the virus all over the world has restricted the free movement of the people internationally. International and domestic flights were canceled to contain the spread of the virus and there were uncertainties about the onward and return journeys. In some countries, the virus started to spread as early as the end of December 2019 and the beginning of January 2020. The first confirmed case of

the virus in India was reported from the state of Kerala on 30th January 2020.

Many social celebrations and gatherings were restricted and some were postponed as the gathering of people could expose many to the deadly virus. according to Jerome (2020) sites that are perplexed by the speed of the virus, governments enforced complete locked down as a temporary solution to contain the virus. And there was an unprepared unexpected closure of everything in the world. People were asked to stay home and do not go out without any serious reason and in some cases, it led to an increase in domestic violence.

Impact on the Economy

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has warned about the possible global recession as a fallout of the widespread pandemic all over the world and especially in developing countries and India will experience this economic decline which will lead to a fall in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The government of India announced a nationwide locked down from March 25, 2020, which has progressive changes in restrictions and the impact of this locked down on the Indian economy is likely to be significant (Fernandez, 2020). Though an optimistic economist may see recovery from the recession, it may not be so straight forward and quick. With no sign of the pandemic being brought under control, and no vaccine is in sight the economic activity which came to a standstill during the locked down will take time and resource to bounce back. The Central government's decision to remove most of the restrictions has provided much-needed relief in business, large and small. The ill-effects of pandemic and the method of controlling the virus has affected the micro, small and medium enterprises. The migrant worker's exodus to their homeland during the locked down was a crisis in itself. After losing their job, fearing they would run out of cash and food they undertook the long journey to their villages in search of consolation, food, and a place to live with their families (Fernandez, 2020). Another sector that needs attention to discuss is agriculture. With the already distressed farm sector coupled with economic disasters, the farmers are in a state of distress. The pandemic and locked down has made the farmers' life more miserable and lead them to the deep debt trap.

Impact on Health

Hardly anyone thought that the disease would strike almost all parts of the world at a time we are least expected. People are still trying

to find out its origin. In February 2020, the virus was named SARS CoV2 by the International Committee of Taxonomy of Virus (ICTV). The new coronavirus disease caused by SARS Cov2 was named Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). The symptoms include fever, cough, fatigue, difficulty in breathing. It was deadlier than any other virus and put every country in tribulation. COVID virus could affect both the upper and lower parts of the lungs. A simple cough from a patient is enough to cause this infection. The medical fraternity is still grappling with effective diagnosis, treatment, and stop the acute spread and mutations of the virus (Jerome, 2020). The symptoms of the virus attack seem to be changing rapidly. The scientists say there is a variation of the symptoms as Covid-19 like symptoms the patients need more diagnosis to ascertain the infection. The fatality of the current virus is more in patients with comorbidity, like hypertension, diabetes, age-related complication, and cardiovascular diseases.

Psychological Impact

The global outbreak of COVID-19 has impacted humanity so intensely and continues to affect the people. Das (2020) in his research highlights the psychological impact of Covid-19 on the general population in the following ways. All previous large-scale disasters have had a significant negative impact on individuals ranging from depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse disorder, domestic violence. The current pandemic has given rise to similar psychological concerns like anxiety, depression, loneliness, domestic violence, and with schools closed there is a real possibility of child abuse. Stressors included quarantine duration, fears of infection, helplessness, frustration, boredom, inadequate supplies and information, financial loss, and stigma. He continues to highlight that the continual social media news on Covid-19 is the cause of common over-reactive behavior among the general public. And the upsurge of information on the virus coming from all sources is overwhelming and all-consuming (Das, 2020).

The interviews done with the psychiatrists of a well-known hospital in India have explained anxiety related to fear of COVID-19. Some patients expressed the fear of contracting the infection while the others expressed uncertainty of losing the job also lack social connectivity for patients and withdrawal symptoms for alcohol and substance users who are dependent (Das, 2020)

Uncertainty causes severe psychological and psychiatric threats in individuals. There is a chance of those who have survived the disease may experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Depression and anxiety may worsen in some people and the case of suicide due to the uncertainty of the disease was reported from different parts of the country. There is anxiety-related claustrophobic and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) present among the patients (Jerome, 2020) Working mothers seems to be experiencing burn out more than anyone else. They are wanted from all corners, by the children to help them in online classes, to join for the zoom meeting related to a job, and other domestic chores. Some working moms feel exhausted, frustrated, impatient, and a mind overflowing with an endless to-do-list(TOI).

Impact on Education

Once the virus spread throughout the world, authorities advised people to maintain social distance as a primary prevention step. As the days went by every country started to lock down every establishment without the exception of the educational institutions including schools, colleges, and universities. Classes were suspended and all examinations of schools, colleges, and universities including entrance exams were postponed indefinitely. Though the locked down was once in a lifetime experience, it leads to initiate an alternative new method for classroom teaching, the digital learning model (Jena, 2020). Though in the initial stages the online teaching was not welcomed later on everyone tried to rise to the demanding method of the digital learning-teaching model. The not so techno-savvy teachers picked up their communication media gadgets and tried to rise to the demands of the situation. Many of the teachers who found it hard to begin the exercise of online teaching have become masters and experts in the technology-assisted teaching-learning process.

According to Jena(2020), though COVID-19 has created a lot of negative impact on education there is some positive effect as well. Like, all the educational institutions tried on Blended Learning, an increase in the use of Learning Management Systems, enhance the use of soft copy learning material, improvement in collaborative work, and enhanced digital literacy. Along with the side benefits of digital learning, the Indian education system suffered a lot at the time of this pandemic. They are as follows: education activity is hampered, unprepared teacher/student for the online class, increased responsibility for parents to assist the children in learning, less access to digital learning for the

poor children and government school children, financial difficulty for the parents to pay the fee and the management to pay the salary to the staff. There are other problems faced by the educational institutions, like the employees of the school transport had to forgo salaries, some poor institutions were not able to pay the regular salary of teachers and had to reduce it into half salary and so on. Psychologically the students have become more restless and impatient. They have lost the benefits of observational learning completely and the values they would have to learn from peer interaction.

Impact on Religious Expression and Practices

Jerome (2020) has made a very valid observation on the impact of the Covid-19 on religious worship, expression, and practices. The pandemic has put aside very important religious feasts of Christians (Easter), Hindus (Ram Navami and VinayakaChathurthy), Muslims (Ramdan), Jews (Passover), and many others of little traditions. The method of worship by major religions differ in many ways. All the religions have a public expression of worship and personal expression of spirituality. In Hinduism, according to Bhajanananda(1995), “worship is possible only where there is an I-Thou relationship, it is found only in the bhakti marg” (p.75). The I-Thou relationship can be expressed in three ways; prayer, worship, and contemplation. These three different ways of expression are personal and communal. In Christianity, the event of revelation is the death and resurrection of Christ, namely an intervention of God in human history which cannot be adequately expressed through human wisdom. Christian worship is a memorial in symbols of this revelatory act (Puthenangadi, 1995). Islam and other major religions too have the method of worship in both ways, individual and communal. The spread of the virus and locked down has forced everyone to express their faith in family and individually and not to congregate into big numbers and break the social distance. These restrictions may have put control on the celebration part of the feasts and special days but no has put conditions on the individual and family celebration of faith. Rosario (2020) says, “What the Second Vatican Council had visualized about 60 years ago in spontaneously taking some definitive shape now. I mean, the home -church: a new way of being the Church.” When the parishes were closed in the last week of March, there was a feeling that the faithful may weaken their faith. But the result was something to behold. The families came together to

attend the virtual celebration of the Liturgy that too on time and with preparation (Rosario, 2020).

The pastoral ministry and taking care of the spiritual need of the faithful by the Pastor in person were suspended and virtual pastoral work took its place. The faithful did not lose faith in their conviction but they strengthened their bond with God through the personalized expression of their faith.

The impact of COVID-19 on people and their lives was too much to handle but with faith in God and people, everyone was able to manage their lives to a certain extent. They realized that they could survive only if the virus was kept at a distance. The lives of the average population were characterized by difficulty and struggles. Celebrations and shows of power and wealth were suspended and the only concern was to survive. The line that separated the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless became blurred. And all felt the need to help each other to survive by keeping the virus away.

Impact of Covid-19 on Religious Formation

The national locked down has affected another group of people very badly this time re the young men and women information. The impact of COVID-19 on the general population has affected the person's information too. The religious formation can be divided into initial and ongoing formation. Initial formation refers to the time spent learning and getting familiarized with religious life in general and one's congregation, charism, spirituality, and ministry in particular. The initial formation is similar for the clerical congregation, diocesan, and lay religious and it ends with ordination, and final profession. For clerical congregations both final profession and ordination. For a better and clear discussion on the topic, we will call all those who come under this category as formees. In their respective stage of formation, they may be called candidates, novices, theologians major seminarians, junior sisters, scholastics, and so on.

The impact of COVID-19 on the formation ministry is as severe as in the other field of ministry. The inconvenience, danger, and pain of contracting the virus were evident among the formees, formators, and leadership. The pandemic put a brake on the formation process at least for a few months from the national locked down started by the end of March 2020 and the uncertainty of the future of formation was the only certainty. As the uncertainty continued, many formation houses tried to

find a way out to bring the formees together to restart or commence the formation process. The problems faced by the formees and formators in this pandemic situation were related to 1. Society 2. Health, 3. Academic life, 4. Spiritual life, 5. Community life, 6. Ministry, 7. Vocation Facilitation. Since formation differs for the clerical congregation and non-clerical congregation, for men and women, the discussion will also have some specific pedagogical differences.

Society

The entire country was locked down from the end of March 2020 leaving the formees to stay where they were on those days because of the restriction on movement. They could be at home who went for a short visit or got stuck in the place of ministry or even in the formation house unable to move to the next stage of formation. Those who were on the move were asked to go on quarantine depending upon the place they were in. The formators who were on transfer to take over the formation houses were also faced with the same hurdles of getting in the place of a new appointment. Everyone felt a sense of helplessness. Those who were able to reach the formation houses were asked to go for a seven-day home quarantine or a 14-day quarantine. In short, the formation program in most of the congregations came to a standstill.

Health

Covid-19 has affected the physical and mental health of the formees and the formators severely. One who contracted the virus were anxious about the cure and the others were anxious about avoiding the virus. There was fearfulness visible in everyone. There was no way of knowing who has the virus and, leaving all of us in a state of fear (Alphonse, 2020). Everyone was asked to keep social distance and follow the medical protocol of personal hygiene, by washing hands frequently, using face masks, and cleaning the hand with sanitizer often. Since the current pandemic is not just a personal sickness like cancer or an accident, but a global human catastrophe. We do not know whether the pandemic one day will disappear or will remain like HIV-AIDS or other sicknesses which has no real cure (Alexander, 2020). Whatever the outcome with regards to the pandemic, the current situation of the virus is that it has swept the entire world. The very thought of Covid-19 can make us anxious and even drive us to stop watching the daily news to avoid unnecessary stress.

Academic Life

The formative life of a person is full of academic activities, in both spiritual and mundane subjects. To make the consecrated life more authentic, the formation program should be relevant and meaningful (Vettukallel, 2016). An effective academic program will help in training the formees for an authentic and holistic formation. In many of the formation houses except the major seminaries and Institutes of Theology and Philosophy the resource person are the resident staff. The Institute of Theology and Philosophy had to face inconvenience galore in this time of Covid-19 and locked down. Students could not reach the Institutions and they were asked to attend on-line classes. On-line classes had more problems than solutions. The possibility of formees possessing mobile phones and other gadgets of social communication was remote. And the network was so erratic that there were frequent interruptions in the relays. The congregations had to rewrite some of the guidelines for the use of social media and facilitate healthy use of it. The effectiveness of online classes for formees needs thorough scrutiny. Because formation to consecrated life is a journey towards wholeness and fullness in Christ (Vettukallel, 2016) just stimulating the intelligence of the formees and online classes alone cannot lead a person to wholeness.

Spiritual Life

“The core of consecrated life is a deep relationship with the person of Jesus,” says, Vettukallel (2016). The identity and mark of a consecrated person is his/her special relationship with God, with people, and with the entire cosmos. This relationship gradually progresses in the person from birth and develops more effectively during one's life span. Formation years are suitable for developing further this relationship with assistance from an effective formator. It is clear that without a deep intimacy with God experienced in prayer, the formees will not succeed in understanding consecrated life. Once the formee experiences God it becomes easy for him/her to share it with others in ministry. So, it becomes important to give sufficient emphasis to developing a taste for spiritual life. Formators are the facilitators of the growth process of the formees and they play a vital role in formation through their accompaniment (Vettukallel, 2016). In a situation like the present pandemic spreading all over the world, it was nearly impossible for the formators and formees to come together. In some cases, the pre-novices entered into the novitiate in the same place as

the pre-novitiate with special permission from the Superior General. The present situation made formators men and women more flexible in adopt suitable measures for the formation process.

Community Life

Community life is a constitutive dimension of religious life. Parathazham(2016) says, "Religious vocation is a call to live- long commitment to live in communion with other members to share one's life and resources with one's community and together pursue a common mission" (p.344). Therefore, the quality of community life affects the quality of one's ministry and life. The community's needs and goals should be above the needs and goals of the individuals. The community in turn functions as a support system for the individual's apostolic commitment (Parathazham, 2016). The physical presence of the members in the community enhances the quality of community and religious life. Similarly, the celebration of the important achievements and special days in the life of the members could improve the interpersonal bond in the community. But unfortunately, the pandemic has prevented all close interactions and keep away from coming together. The social distancing in a bigger community made the members keep away from one another. Irrational fear of contracting the virus affected many of the members in the same way as not taking the necessary precaution at all by some of the members these both extremes affected the members in the communities.

Ministry

During the formative period, the formees are initiated and trained in various ministries that the congregation is likely to entrust the members with. The aptitude, interest, and the need of the congregation decides the nature of ministry one takes up. During the time of formation entering into pastoral ministry through assisting in Eucharistic celebration, faith education, family visits are the common ministries given to the formees. Locked down which began in March 2020 prevented the formees to continue with the usual ministries and comply with the orders of the government authorities. These restrictions did not stop the enthusiasm of the formees to discover something new to continue with the ministries. On-line Eucharistic celebration and live streaming to the parishioners was one of the ways to fulfil the pastoral needs of the faithful. But those who were involved in family apostolate had to suspend their ministry but joined hands with various agencies to help

the migrant workers who were on the road heading towards home and distributing food grain kits to families who would go hungry otherwise.

Vocation Facilitation

Every member of the congregation feels the need to encourage vocations. It is also true that if we want to attract candidates to the congregation we need to be visible to the young men and women of today. The old form of advertisement and promotion by publishing various ministry done by the congregation is no more attractive to the younger generation. The Congregations need to come up with creative ideas to make known the Charism of every founder. The spread of the present virus, Covid-19, and the national locked down has become a stumbling block in the vocation ministry. The usual method of visiting houses of the prospective candidates was not possible due to control in the free movement of those who are in vocation ministry.

Other than the difficulty of getting in touch with the prospective candidates even if the probable ones were not able to join the congregation because of the suspension of all modes of transport in the latter part of March 2020.

Formation Beyond Covid-19

It is written on the wall that the present pandemic, Covid-19 has been a dangerous virus claiming the lives of more than a million world over. "But often also for an unstable and dangerous social situation, it can also represent an opportunity for change, transformation, and improvement" (Imoda, 2016, p. 314). In the next section, we will discuss what those positive changes have surfaced or what is new that we have learned in these trying times which can be put into practice for a suitable formation program. This new learning can be categorized under, 1. Christocentric Formation, 2. Freedom with Accountability in Formation, 3. Formation for Responsible Religious, 4. Word of God Oriented Formation, 5. Non-Hierarchical formation.

Christocentric Formation

Religious formation is motivated by God who calls each one at every moment and in new circumstances. It is a living grace that must be received and lived in conditions that are often new. Formation to consecrated life helps the formee to conform to the image of Christ, coming closer to Christ helps him/her to serve the people of God effectively. Vettukunnel says, "A holistic formation will help

the consecrated persons to become human and holy, mystic and prophets and thinkers in this globalized era” (2016). All the more the Christocentric formation will help the formee serve humanity in the most difficult time like Covid-19. The formation project may contain a lot of programs to take care of the whole person but that should not lose the objective of making each formee Christ-like.

Freedom with Accountability in Formation

The role of the formator is one of accompaniment and assistance in every working of the Holy Spirit. The emergence of this Spirit demands certain conditions for its effective role (Aykara, 2016). The formator does not take the responsibility for the formee in his/her formation but remains as a companion, helper, guide, and like a gardener who helps the formee to cut the unwanted branches that do not produce fruits. The present pandemic has changed the teaching-learning process. The use of technology and social media is going to be part and parcel of the new normal. Some of the congregations' policies on the use of social media by the formees were put to test during this time of Covid-19. Projecting the whole field of something bad is not going to help (Vattakunnel, 2016). Making the formees accountable for the use of social media responsibly may be a solution. Technology-assisted learning is going to stay on in our seminary and religious formation for many years to come. The formators should educate the formees about the use and abuse of it rather than hiding it.

Formation for Responsible Religious

Formation of an aspiring candidate is a responsibility shared by many. The main agents of formation are the Holy Spirit, the formee, the formator, and the Congregation. The Self-Emergent Spirit is the promised spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, the most important agent of religious formation. The same Spirit is the foundation of our religious vocation and the ever-accompanying guide who guides the formees from within (Aykara, 2016). When the formator takes full responsibility for the formation of the aspiring men and women to be religious without recognizing the role of the others, the quality of the formation gets compromised. It becomes evident when the formator is absent for a short time. In a situation like the national locked down due to the pandemic and the formees are left without a formator, they felt like sheep without a shepherd. If the formation program emphasizes that the formees should be brought up in individual responsibility, they

will take charge of their spiritual as well as religious duties when no authority is around.

Word of God Oriented Formation

The pandemic and locked down have taught all of us that spiritual exercises should be people-oriented and the faithful should be empowered to take care of themselves even if the Pastor is absent. A Word of God-oriented spirituality and liturgical forms gives enough room for the ordinary faithful to express their faith life to experience the Lord. This is similar to the places where Ordained Priests are scarce and Catechists take charge of the community celebration. Here instead of community celebration, the family takes charge of their spiritual life. The formees should be trained to empower the laity to take care of their spiritual life.

Non-Hierarchical Formation

When the formator insists on a hierarchical form of formation, democracy, and respect for the other cease to exist. The non-hierarchical model helps the formator to shed his/her authoritarian style of formation and allow the formee to listen to the Spirit who is the real formator. A hierarchical model can prevent the formee from becoming free and always on the lookout for the formator for guidance and instructions. Individual initiative and creativity will be the first casualty in such kind of formation. The present pandemic situation has made the formators to tap the spiritual wealth of each formee to continue the formation where ever they were. This trying time has opened the eyes of the formation system of every congregation demanding a closer look at their formation ministry.

Conclusion

The formation is a demanding ministry for those who take it seriously. It was all the more demanding to the formators during this time of the Covid-19 and the national locked down. Though the situation caused inconvenience to many with God's grace and selfless service of people of God formation continued in the best way it could. The article looked at the present situation in the country and how it was impacted by the pandemic and the last part of the paper looked at what we have learned from the situation for the formation of the future. Added to all that is spelled out above to improve the formation of the aspiring candidates who want to set apart their life for the people, what is emphasized here is the suggestion for training the diocesan clergy professionally

along with the pastoral formation, a profession that goes along with the dignity of a priest. One of the many challenges raised by the pandemic and locked down was the struggle the diocesan clergy faced with regards to their survival not only in India but also those who are serving in the diocese abroad. The spread of the Covid-19 virus is a dangerous living situation for the entire world. Ramping up the efforts to clinically halt the virus is the mega challenge for all the countries. Each country is still grappling with effective diagnosis, treatment, and a vaccine to stop the spread of the virus. As we the formators help the formees to grow closer to Christ and become effective men and women of God to spread the love of Christ let us also become responsibly sensitive and resilient and give hope to others during this difficult time of the pandemic Covid-19.

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