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# Where is the Church in the Time of COVID-19 Pandemic: Preferring the Poor via G. Gutierrez’ “Liberation” and the Catholic Church’s Social Teaching in the Philippine Setting

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## Abstract

In a world where everything seems to be measured in reference to money and economic progress, the problem of poverty becomes an increasingly urgent concern. The experience of poverty is even becoming problematic when the world seemed to be unprepared for times of pandemic. COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the suffering of the poor more than just a health risk, especially in the Philippine setting. In such a situation, people wonder, where is the church? Most critics of the Catholic Church in the Philippines utilized the social media platform in crying out their denunciation to Catholic Church leaders. It is in this context that the paper explores the ‘Liberation Theology’ of Gustavo Gutiérrez in relation to the Catholic Church’s Social Teaching, whether the experience of poverty and crisis is part of the socio-spiritual responsibility of the church. To do this, the paper utilized the exploratory method of textual analysis. Through examining the text of extant literature on Gustavo Gutiérrez’s Liberation Theology and the Social Teachings of the Catholic Church, the paper constructed a holistic understanding of “Preferential Option for the Poor.” The arguments presented in this paper could serve as the basis for current praxis of the different catholic congregations in the Philippines in mitigating the experience of crisis among Filipino poor amid COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** Preferential Option for the Poor, Liberation Theology, Catholic Church, Philippines, COVID-19

## 1. Introduction

In a world where everything seems to be measured in reference to money and economic progress, the problem of poverty becomes an increasingly urgent concern. Money seems to become the sole impetus for economic activity, and financial gain appears to be the lone goal of continued efforts for industrial efficiency and development. In itself, progress is not inadequate; on the contrary, it is most commendable and must be fostered vigorously. However, the experience of poverty is even becoming problematic when the world seemed to be unprepared for times of pandemic (cf. Denkey, 2015; Lakoff, 2017; Madhav et al., 2017; Sikich, 2018; Arbeláez-Campillo & Rojas-Bahamon, 2020). As reported by World Health Organization (as cited by Sohrabi et al., 2020), the world

experienced another health-related crisis of a spreading virus which treatment is yet to be discovered, the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 was first identified in China last December of 2019 and has contaminated many countries around the globe since then (cf. Lu et al., 2020; Wu & McGoogan, 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). Indeed, the world's nations are grappling with the global health emergency threatening people of all ages and status quo (Casella et al., 2020). Albeit most likely older people as well as those with underlying medical conditions (cf. Guo et al., 2020; Mizumoto et al., 2020; Remuzzi & Remuzzi, 2020; Roser et al., 2020).

COVID-19 also resulted in the suffering of the poor more than just a health risk (cf. Aljazeera, 2020, March; United Nations, 2020, March; United Nations Development Programme, 2020, March; Wright & Harman, 2020, March). Wright & Harman (2020, March) purported that with the health measures needed to contain the pandemic, vulnerable members of the communities are socially and economically affected. Just like in the Philippine setting, after having confirmed the cases of the disease on January 30, 2020, President Rodrigo Duterte signed the Proclamation 922, which placed the entire country under the state of a public health emergency (Philippine News Agency, 2020, March). Health measures are adapted such as but not limited to community quarantine, social distancing and limiting the movement of people including banning of mass transportation, 'work from home' arrangement, and worst, closure of establishment thereby affecting most of the country's working class (cf. Mahusay, 2020; Parmet, 2020; Remuzzi & Remuzzi, 2020; Wilder-Smith & Freedman, 2020; Wu & McGoogan, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic inevitably slows down the economy as purported by the Secretary of Budget and Finance (as cited by Philippine News Agency, 2020, March). The Department of Labor and Employment (as cited by Philippine News Agency, 2020, March) added that workers who belong to the informal sectors are the most affected members of the society. The problem of poverty coupled with the health crisis rose to an international scale and has become an immediate global concern, affecting not merely individuals but entire nations (cf. Heymann, 2015; Smith, 2015; World Health Organization, 2015; Eriksen, 2018). The so-called "Third World Countries," which are mostly found in Asia and Africa, have become the core of international attention. The clamor for financial aid and economic assistance is louder than ever (World Health Organization, 2015). The problem of poverty and health crisis did not emerge overnight, nor appeared by itself without due cause (Heymann, 2015). Although all entities in all rungs of society have and still decry poverty, it remains an incontrovertible fact that it affects the majority of the world (Eriksen, 2018). Because of this prevalent social disparity, it becomes more imperative that the interests of those who are most affected by this economic imbalance must be given the highest priority (Smith, 2015).

In such a situation, people wonder, where is the church? This statement hurdled over social media like Facebook and Twitter. Most critics of the Catholic Church in the Philippines utilized the social media platform in crying out their denunciation to Catholic Church leaders (Manila Times, March, 2020). It is in this context that the paper explores the 'Liberation Theology' of Gustavo Gutiérrez in relation to the Catholic Church's Social Teaching, whether the experience of poverty and crisis is part of the socio-spiritual responsibility of the church. Moreover, this paper relates these teachings to the current praxis of the Catholic Church's different congregations in the Philippine setting to mitigate the experience of crisis among Filipino poor.

It is the aim of both Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Social Teachings of the Catholic Church to unfetter man with the onerous and humiliating burden of poverty and crisis. The poor and underprivileged cannot fulfill this process of "Liberation" by themselves. The inability of the poor and disadvantaged to improve their social condition placed an unwavering role of the church to assist the poor in their struggle for "Liberation." This "duty" is neither a mere prescription of religion nor a simple appeal to emotion. It is, first and foremost, an intrinsic ethical obligation. Driven by the Christian call to charity, the necessity for a "Preferential Option for the Poor" is thus created. It is the poor who are the most in need of "Liberation," and yet they are the least capable of effecting this; it becomes necessary to assist them in their aim. Saint John Paul II, in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, mentions the necessity of taking the poor into account in the creation of decisions that affect society and the appropriation of goods. Thus, this paper would establish that the Catholic Church in the Philippines decried the experience of poverty and crisis as trying situations since these experiences demean the dignity of the human person. This

“unfettering” of the heavy chains of poverty and crisis has been effectively called “Liberation.” In this regard, Gutiérrez says that liberation is not merely economic freedom and financial stability. Still, most of all, it is “liberation from all that limits or keeps man from self-fulfillment, liberation from all impediments to the exercise of his freedom.”

## 2. Method

The paper utilized the exploratory method of textual analysis. Through examining the text of extant literature on Gustavo Gutiérrez’s Liberation Theology and the Social Teachings of the Catholic Church, the paper constructed a holistic understanding of “Preferential Option for the Poor.” The arguments presented in this paper could serve as the basis for current praxis of the different catholic congregations in the Philippines in mitigating the experience of crisis among Filipino poor amid COVID-19 pandemic.

## 3. Preferring the Poor and G. Gutiérrez’ Liberation Theology

It must be noted that the concept of the “Preferential Option of the Poor” cannot be clearly extricated from Gustavo Gutiérrez’ Theology of Liberation (cf. Buffel, 2015; Robeck; Vellem, 2017; Richard, 2018). First and foremost, the entire theological and philosophical work of Gutiérrez is geared towards a full “Liberation” of the poor. Holden et al. (2017) purported that Liberation Theology caters to the needs of the poor and acknowledges the eminence and priority of the poor in the scheme of socio-economic development. In other words, the “Preferential Option for the Poor” is subsumed in the encompassing idea of “Liberation.”

Gutiérrez (as cited by Tibur, 2016) draws an eloquent analogy that defines the nationhood of the Israelites, God’s chosen people, and by extension, the identity of the Christian believer. Gutiérrez opined that Christian people are the theological successors to the Israelite nation of the Old Testament (Tibur, 2016). Since the new covenant instituted by Jesus Christ during his Passion and death effectively supersedes the old covenant instituted by God with the Israelites through Abraham (Tibur, 2016).

Moe (2016) added that Gutiérrez believed that God Himself has always had a loving preference for the poor. Gutiérrez (as cited by Wiryadinata, 2018) claimed that Yahweh is the protector of the poor...defense of the poor is the ineradicable seal that permanently marks the covenant. The “Preferential Option for the Poor” is the affirmation of the Christian identity and the bond which links the Divine to man. God’s preference for the poor does not only mean a passive love for them but more importantly, God Himself intervenes in the course of history to liberate the poor (Corrin, 2017). For Gutiérrez (as cited by Gounopoulos, 2017), God commits himself to the people; therefore, God intervenes in history as their liberator and avenger, in order to establish justice and righteousness.

“Liberation Theology” has always taken upon itself the duty to voice out the cries of the parched throats of the poor, dying and miserable of the society (Wiryadinata, 2018). Gutiérrez (as cited by Wiryadinata, 2018) believed that the perspective of the theology of liberation spoke the language of subjugated peoples, of exploited classes, and of despised races and marginalized cultures. More than anything else, the “Preferential Option for the Poor” is a positive discrimination for and towards the poor. Gutiérrez takes time to explain the term “Preferential Option for the Poor” in relation to the emerging social awareness. Gutiérrez (as cited by Buffel, 2015; Jorgenson, 2019; Kotzé, 2019) said that the expression ‘preferential option for the poor’ emerged from within Christian communities. At the same time it is also a concretization of the tripartite nature of “Liberation” (Corrin, 2017). On one hand, ‘poor’, refers to victims of material poverty. On the other hand, ‘preferential’ is inspired by the notion of spiritual childhood or the capacity to accept the will of God in our lives. While, ‘option’ relates to the idea of commitment that means solidarity with the poor and rejection of poverty as something contrary to the will of God.

The Christian idea of “Preferential Option for the Poor” is not something foreign to the consciousness and theology of the Catholic Church. Gustavo Gutiérrez, acknowledges the fact that the “Preferential Option for the Poor” is pivotal to Catholic Social thought, it is a perspective which is widely accepted in the teaching of the universal

Church (cf. Buffel, 2015; Jorgenson, 2019; Kotzé, 2019). Gutiérrez, in his quest to reinvent and re-contextualize this deep-rooted idea, touches on the fundamental aspect of solidarity with the poor and the underprivileged. Gutiérrez extensively discusses the Church's role as a more authentic and radical witness of poverty (cf. Kleeb, 2015; Walatka, 2015; Shannahan, 2019). In Biblical Exegeses, poverty has become a faithful way of imitating the poor Christ. Similar to the Franciscan movement, which aimed for a more truthful expression and emulation of Christ's teachings, the call for poverty and solidarity with the poor has had found its own expression reflecting the spirit of a particular day and age.

For Gutiérrez (as cited by Comber, 2015; Hesselms & Teubner, 2017; Mong, 2017), poverty encompasses economic, social, and political dimensions. It is certainly more than all that, poverty means death, an unjust death, and the premature death of the poor. The *prima facie* manifestation of poverty is, of course, material and economic; but despite this seemingly purely materialistic and limited conception of poverty, there are deeper and more important things at stake. What is ultimately at stake is life itself. Gutiérrez, meanwhile, describes "preference" as an implication of "the universality of God's love, which excludes no one (Hesselms & Teubner, 2017). Contrary to the initial impression it makes, God's "preference" is not a bias nor is it an exclusivist form of particularism (Comber, 2015). One must never forget that the love of God is always universal. Gutiérrez offers a clarification of his use of the word "preference". Senander (2015), quoting Gutiérrez, said that God's love has two dimensions, the universal and the particular; and while there is a tension between the two, there is no contradiction. God's love excludes no one. Nevertheless, God demonstrates a special predilection toward those who have been excluded from the banquet of life. The word '*preference*' recalls the other dimension of the gratuitous love of God—the universality.

In this context, Gutiérrez' philosophy, the "Preferential Option for the Poor" entails a genesis of human consciousness and the gradual liberation of man (Hesselman & Teubner, 2017). This particular form of "Option for the Poor" is a praxis-oriented human struggle for "Liberation." The poor in society – those who are most in need of "Liberation," are at the same time incapacitated by the unjust burden of poverty which society imposes upon them. This why there must be a more decided and direct thrust in favor of the oppressed, encouraging them to break with their present situation and take control of their own destiny (Hesselman & Teubner, 2017). The poor must be given a chance, aided by society and the Christian community to emerge from the depths of abysmal wretchedness and ascend into the vast horizon of teleological fulfillment and human equality (cf. Buffel, 2015; Jorgenson, 2019; Kotzé, 2019).

The concrete expression of the Preferential Option for the Poor" is encapsulated by Gutiérrez (as cited by Comber, 2015): "It is not enough to say that love of God is inseparable from the love of one's neighbor. It must be added love for God is unavoidably expressed *through* love for one's neighbor." Similar to the Augustinian (as cited by White, 2015; Russell, 2018) maxim "Love, and do what thou wilt," Gutiérrez intimates that a real and sincere love of God undeniably and inescapably manifests itself. Through which the love for one's neighbors, especially the poor, to whom Christ has a close and enduring affinity. Finally, the "Preferential Option for the Poor" fulfills an Evangelical and an Eschatological function. The "Preferential Option for the Poor" announces a "Gospel of Liberation," a realization of the Kingdom in history, and as such an announcement of the fullness of the Kingdom which is beyond history (cf. Puggioni, 2016; Boer, 2017; Jorgenson, 2019).

#### **4. Preferring the Poor and the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church**

The "Preferential Option for the Poor" is not a foreign concept in Catholic Social Thought (cf. Thompson, 2015; O'Brien & Shannon, 2016; Schlag, 2017; McKenna, 2019). In a statement given by Pope John Paul II (as cited by Twomey, 2017) to the Workers of Ecuador, he says that "[t]he problem of frequent injustice and the exploitation of work has long been a concern of the Catholic Church... as an integral part of her mission, she can and must always proclaim the moral, human, and Christian principles and values of social life." One may argue that these social issues are first and foremost under the purview of sociology, politics, and economics. The Catholic Church, being the Mother and Teacher of all peoples identify with the suffering and the hardships of all men, especially

the poor. As Pope John XXIII (as cited by Sison et al., 2016) says, “the Apostolic See had come out strongly in defense of the earthly interests of the poor.”

It has always been an enduring duty of the Catholic Church to speak out for and on behalf of the poor. John Paul II aptly defined the modern role and contemporary social mission of the Catholic Church (Sánchez & Polga-Hecimovich, 2019). The Pope, the Church, and her hierarchy want to continue to act on behalf of the poor, their dignity, their elevation, their rights as persons, and their aspirations to a social justice that can no longer be delayed (McKenna, 2019). The Catholic Church recognizes the role of the Church *for* the Poor. The document released by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, under Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Benedict XVI) entitled “*Libertatis Nuntius*,” which is commonly cited as one of the greatest critiques of the more liberal strains of “Liberation Theology,” does not deny the importance of the cause of “Liberation Theology.” On the contrary, the document underlines the mission of the Church to combat injustice and oppression in any form, not merely economic. Ratzinger (as cited by Spieker & Lutz, 2018) said that the Church intends to condemn abuses, injustices, and attacks against freedom, wherever they occur and whoever commits those. The Church intends to struggle, by her own means, for the defense and advancement of the rights of humankind, especially of the poor (Spieker & Lutz, 2018).

The Catholic Church’s unwavering solidarity and defense of the poor are visible in the history of Social Teachings. Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* extensively treats the problems of labor, wages, private property and human dignity, all in the context of the poor working man (Waterman, 2016). The succeeding encyclicals of subsequent popes have always dealt with these topics and more in the context of the age and time it was written. Paul VI, in his encyclical *Populorum Progressio* calls for coordinated international measures to relieve not merely single populations but entire nations of the problem of poverty (Heidt, 2017). The present collective feeling of apathy and indifference has been condemned by Paul VI as the ‘sickness of the world’ (cf. Aina, 2017; Heidt, 2017; Pfeil, 2018; Mengès-Le Pape, 2019). Paul VI (as cited by Heidt, 2017) said that the world is sick with illness consists less in the unproductive monopolization of resources by a small number of men than in the lack of brotherhood among individuals and peoples. Mengès-Le Pape (2019) opined that there must be a reawakening of the Christian sense of compassion and empathy with the poor. It is not enough to merely acknowledge the fact and existence of poverty, but more importantly to act for its eradication. In order to realize this, the society must have a sense of justice and an understanding of what is due to the human individual (Aina, 2017).

For Saint Thomas Aquinas (as cited by Fastiggi, 2019) defined justice as the constant and firm will to give what is due to God and neighbor. Poverty is an unjust and immoral state for a human being to be in (Fastiggi, 2019). Man must live in accordance to his dignity and status as a being “created in the image and likeness of God.” It is necessary therefore to accord to man what is *justly* due to him. Saint Augustine (as cited by Cort, 2020) added that the superfluities of the rich are the necessities of the poor... when you possess superfluities, you possess what belongs to others. Charity, therefore, is not so much as an option but an obligation (cf. Knowles & Servátka, 2015; Taylor, 2015; Pummer, 2016; Goodin, 2017; Moran, 2017). When someone gives alms to the poor they are not simply practicing Christian charity, but more importantly, they are rehabilitating to the poor what is rightly theirs (Pope, 2015). When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice (cf. Brady, 2018; Lucas, 2018; Matthews, 2019; Regan, 2019). The Vatican Council II document *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (as cited by Nagei, 2019) claimed that what is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift of charity. This notion of justice and charity underlies the solidarity of the Church with the poor (Nagei, 2019). Society does not owe it to the poor to be charitable, but instead, society owes it to itself to fulfill its just obligation. As pronounced by St. John Paul II (as cited by Sanders & Communism, 2017), “love for others, and in the first place love for the poor, in whom the Church sees Christ himself, is made concrete in the promotion of justice.”

The Second Vatican Council also recognizes the role of the Church as being a Church not merely *for* the poor, but also for a Church *of* the poor. It must be noted that the term “Church” is used in its broadest and most fundamental sense. “Church” here does not only refer to the hierarchy, but also the entire faithful community. The Catholic Church does not only recognize the abstract economic, sociological, philosophical and theological concept of

poverty in the intellectual level. More importantly, the Catholic Church knows and feels the suffering of the poor in their daily struggle for existence. The Catholic Church does not merely sympathize with the poor; but also identifies with the poor and is among the poor. Albeit, this does not imply that the hierarchy and the clergy are to be exempt from the commitment of poverty shared by the lay faithful. On the contrary, it means the poverty of the clergy themselves. The clergy, in their role as evangelizers of peoples, must preach not only by words, but more importantly by example.

In church document, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (as cited by De Mey, 2018), the clergy are invited to embrace voluntary poverty to become more clearly conformed to Christ. Furthermore, the Catholic Church warns against abusing the ecclesiastical office for personal gains. Clergies are not to regard the ecclesiastical office as a source of profit and are not to spend the income accruing from it to increase their private fortunes (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, as cited by De Mey, 2018). It is very important to note that the Catholic Church is one of the heavily criticized religious institutions in terms of wealth acquisition (cf. Rose, 2015; Mich, 2016; McLoughlin, 2017). In a document of the Second Episcopal Conference of Latin America (as cited by Luciani, 2018), the notion that the Hierarchical Church is rich is due to misunderstanding and sensationalizing by media-propaganda rather than a genuine understanding of the structure and workings of the Catholic Church. Many causes have contributed to creating this impression of a rich hierarchical church. The great buildings, the rectories, and religious houses that are better than those of the neighbors, the often luxurious vehicles, the attire, inherited from other eras, have been some of those causes. All this has helped substantiate the argument that the church is rich (Luciani, 2018).

The misunderstanding of the Catholic Church's richness is a misleading pointer that leads people to assume that the Catholic Church is living a life of hypocrisy and contradiction. But a further investigation and a more holistic approach to this issue will banish these presuppositions and create a more evenhanded comprehension of the truth behind the perceived grandeur of the Catholic Church. There is also a prevailing sentiment among the poor that the bishops and the clergy are not wholly fully aware and cognizant of the truth and pain of poverty because they have the necessities of life and a certain security (Luciani, 2018) which the poor do not have. This further contributes to the increasing alienation of the poor faithful to the seemingly elite clergy. The Catholic clergy and the whole Catholic Church must bear a genuine witness to the poverty of Christ and to live their vows of obedience, chastity and poverty in a more concrete way (Luciani, 2018). The poverty of the church ought to be a sign and a commitment of the inestimable value of the poor in the eyes of God, and obligation of solidarity with those who suffer (Luciani, 2018). In order to fully understand the suffering of the poor, the Church and the clergy must "make theirs the problems of the poor" (Luciani, 2018). Moreover, the document of Second Episcopal Conference of Latin America (as cited by Luciani, 2018) exhorted that the religious communities; that in consonance with their respective charisms, ought to witness to the poverty of Christ. We encourage those who feel themselves called to form from among their members small communities, truly incarnated in the poor environment. The Church, carrying on the work of Christ, 'who made himself poor for us, being rich in order to enrich us with his poverty,' will present before the world a clear and unmistakable sign of the poverty of her Lord (Luciani, 2018).

In the decree *Optatam Totius* (as cited Manea, 2016), Catholic clergies are expected to bear witness in a concrete way. Embracing unity which draws man to Christ by taking the likeness of Christ and forming the habit of drawing close to him in every detail of one's life (Manea, 2016). Furthermore, *Optatam Totius* decrees that the priests should focus their ministry and activity especially among the poor, little children, the weak, sinners and unbelievers (Manea, 2016). The call and commitment of the Church to poverty are always misunderstood and carried to unparalleled extremes. Some people assert that the Church should be completely destitute and totally pauperized. What they miss is that they are focusing merely on the external and vestigial manifestation of poverty rather than the greatest and most important form of poverty of all – Spiritual Poverty. Similar to that fact that some Liberation Theologians (although not Gutiérrez) focus excessively on emancipation from material and economic poverty, without considering the greatest chain which incarcerates humanity – sin.

## 5. The Praxis of Preferential Option for the Poor in the time of COVID-19 in the Philippine Setting

It is not difficult to see the underlying and fundamental *teleological* similarities of Gutiérrez’s “Liberation Theology” and the Catholic Church’s “Social Teachings.” Both ideas aim to free humanity from the unjust and unnatural bondage imposed upon them by unfair and immoral circumstances. Indeed, both views speak of “Liberation” as the ultimate reflection of the “Preferential Option for the Poor.” Preferring the poor is the most critical and far-reaching similarity that binds the two ideological positions together. ‘Theology of Liberation’ refers first of all to a special concern for the poor and the victims of oppression, which in turn begets a commitment to justice (Pulido, 2016). When corporate social responsibility moved all types of institutions to halt the spread of COVID-19 virus, a patchwork of effort by different religious congregations, parishes of different dioceses, non-profit foundations of the Catholic Church in the Philippines to combat the havoc of the pandemic. COVID-19 pandemic threatens to break the frayed fabric of distressed and impoverished families and communities in the country. From this perspective, the pandemic seemed to be another oppressor of the poor. With the COVID-19, the poor and the elderly are the most vulnerable. Such a trying time, called the church to move by doing concrete acts of charity by sharing resources with those who need it the most. In the report of Inquirer (2020, March), parishes within the Archdiocese of Manila have pledged to offer the use of their facilities and transportation services to help health workers fighting the pandemic. Catholic churches and schools are opened to homeless while a number of religious congregations are organizing donations to help the government provide the basic commodities to the ‘least, last and lost’ in society (see Figure 1 to 6).



**Figure 1.** Sisters of Charity of St. Charles Borromeo cut their food allowance to aid to poor households in Tagaytay City, Philippines. Photo retrieved from Facebook.



**Figure 2.** A Camillian brother bringing food relief for the affected impoverished family in Quezon City, Philippines. Photo retrieved from Facebook.



**Figure 3.** Bishop Jose Dialogo of Sorsogon, Philippines bakes bread for frontliners. Photo retrieved from Facebook.



**Figure 4.** Caritas Manila volunteers help packing food bags to poor families affected by the enhanced community quarantine in Metro Manila. Photo retrieved from Facebook.



**Figure 5.** A Franciscan priest gives a grocery voucher from Caritas Manila to a family in Sampaloc, Manila. Photo retrieved from Facebook.



**Figure 6.** A Catholic school serves as temporary shelter for homeless and frontliners. Photo retrieved from Facebook.



As opined by Bishop Raul Dael of Tandag, Philippines, “what is happening all around is a unique moment in our history as a Church. The pandemic crisis is an opportunity to serve the Church in a more creative manner. To serve without counting the cost and to give without expecting for a reward.” The clergy are spurred to social action and involvement and the laity is called to create a more just and equitable social arrangement, which caters to the needs of the poor, the sick and the dying. In consonance with this mission to preach the “Gospel of Liberation,” Gutiérrez and the Catholic Church talks of the importance of assisting the poor in the quest of their own “Liberation.” Those subject to “Liberation,” i.e. the poor, should not be passive bystanders, but active participants in the “Liberating” process. The lay people are called to participate although following some healthy measures like social distancing and wearing face mask. They participate by showing acts of charity and solidarity including selfless service as medical personnel, provider of basic services, law enforcement personnel and agents of pastoral care (Vatican News, 2020, April). These acts of charity and solidarity are exemplary to Catholic of how ordinary lay people, outside the church hierarchy, put their faith into action and live as missionary disciples.

Moreover, Gutiérrez’ “Theology of Liberation” and Catholic Social Teachings also similarly espouse a Church which is not only *for* the poor, but more substantially, a Church *of* the poor. To be able to more effectively bear an authentic witness to the poverty of Christ, the Church and its hierarchy are encouraged to voluntarily embrace a life of poverty, both economic and spiritual (cf. Hesselmanns & Teubner, 2017; De Mey, 2018; Wiryadinata, 2018). Unlike the form of economic poverty spoken of earlier, which is an outrageous and manifest sin, the economic poverty which the Church calls for is living a simple life, with enough material resources for a decent lifestyle befitting the clerical state. The second form of poverty, which Gutiérrez and the Church ask of the Catholic clergy, is “Spiritual Poverty.” This form of poverty entails a child-like surrender of one’s self and trusting fully in the benevolence of the Lord. Both the Church and Gutiérrez do not undermine and ignore the virtue of poverty, especially among the clergy. Once again, the challenge to put this teaching into praxis amid pandemic is enormous. The church hierarchy of clergies must stand as servant-leaders. As Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle (as cited Union of Catholic Asian News, 2018, July) puts it, “to always live with the poor.” More than remaining as prayer warriors, there are religious congregations which members served as medical frontliners and opened the doors of the Parishes and Catholic Schools to homeless. Archbishop Socrates Villegas (as cited by Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines [CBCP] News, 2020a, March) of Lingayen-Dagupan, Philippines, pronounced that those who care for the sick have become the face of Jesus to them. As directed by Bishop Broderick Pabillo, Apostolic Administrator of the Archdiocese of Manila, Philippines, in his pastoral letter, (CBCP News, 2020b, March) “to take care of the sick in our families and communities... for they are weak and vulnerable for infection. Let us remember the words of Jesus: ‘I was sick and you take care of me’ (Mt. 25:36)”.

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested the ability of the church to put its social teaching into practice. As uttered by John Carr, a moral test that requires valuing human life and dignity when the scale of suffering, death, tension, division, and isolation examines who we are, what we believe, and what type of society we are becoming (Crux, 2020, March). Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic becomes an opportunity for the church to renew its vocation to serve.

## 6. Conclusion

When they ask, “where is the church in the time of pandemic?” they are actually looking for God. The Church in the trying times of COVID-19 pandemic struggles to renew its calling as a servant-leader. Through putting its social teaching into practice, the Church is not only *for* the poor but more substantially, a Church *of* the poor. By preferring the poor, the Church strengthens the whole community by assisting those who are the most vulnerable. Indeed, the underlying and fundamental *teleological* similarities of Gutiérrez’ “Liberation Theology” and the Catholic Church’s “Social Teachings” is anchored on love to the hungry, the needy, the homeless, and those without hope amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

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