



Keeping the Faith: Filipino Catholic Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Since March 2020, Metro Manila and other places in the Philippines has been on lockdown because of the surge of Covid-19 cases in the country. Even churches and other places of worship have been off-limits to church goers during strict lockdown measures called “Enhanced Community Quarantine.” This paper looks at how Filipino Catholics practice their religious obligations during the pandemic. Since majority (81%) of Filipinos are Roman Catholics, the focus of this paper is how Filipino Catholics view the Covid-19 pandemic and how they cope with it. The data for this study comes from two sources: 1) interviews with church leaders and lay members; and 2) online and offline ethnographic observation of religious practices during the pandemic. Through an anthropological description of Filipino Catholic attitudes on and responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, we have a better understanding about Filipino resiliency in times of crises.

Key words: Coping, Faith, Resiliency, Spirituality

Catholicism in the Philippines

Catholicism has been introduced by Spain to the Philippines since the archipelago was colonized by Spain from 1565 to 1896. Because of more than 300 years of Spanish colonization, most Filipinos are Roman Catholics. Based on the 2010 Census of Population and Housing, 81% of Filipinos said that they are Roman Catholics. The rest

of the population are Muslims (6%), Evangelical Christians (3%), Iglesia ni Cristo (2%), and members of other religious denominations, including animists (8%).

While the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy in the Philippines strictly adhere to those espoused by the Vatican, most of Filipino Catholic laymen practice a syncretic type of Catholicism.

This syncretism is manifested in the performance of Catholic rituals within the context of indigenous, precolonial beliefs. For example, religious objects, such as the crucifix and the holy water are used to ward off malevolent creatures, such as the *aswang*, a shapeshifter that preys on humans, especially pregnant women and children. Moreover, witches believe that their magical potions are more potent when these are prepared on Good Friday because “God is dead” during that time of the year. Many among the poorer segments of society assume that their beliefs and practices are “Christian” or “introduced by the Spanish” even if these traditions predated the coming of the Spanish to the Philippines. For example, many Filipinos thought that *pagtutuli* (male circumcision) was introduced to the Philippines by Spain emulating the circumcision of Jesus Christ based on Jewish tradition. However, historical accounts prove that circumcision was practiced in the Philippines even before the coming of the Spanish and the Spanish colonizers were in fact uncircumcised.

Majority of Filipino Catholics consider the following as their most important collective religious obligations:

1. Attending the holy mass every Sunday or during the anticipated mass (Saturday night).
2. Having their children baptized

in church, with several friends, relatives, and/or acquaintances acting as *ninong* (godfathers) or *ninang* (godmothers) during baptismal ceremonies. In turn, these godparents are expected to give *aguinaldo* (gifts) in cash or in kind to their godchildren during Christmas.

3. Having a church wedding. While it is possible to have a civil wedding that is officiated by the local town mayor or judge, most Filipinos prefer to have a church wedding when they can afford it. A church wedding is considered more expensive than that of a civil wedding because it entails having a wedding gown for the bride and a wedding banquet where all relatives and friends, and sometimes even all townmates, are invited to attend.
4. Observing Lenten Season rituals. These rituals may include the buying and waving of *palaspas* (palm fronds) on Palm Sunday; undertaking the *Visita Iglesia* (i.e. visit to several churches) on Holy Thursday; practicing abstinence (i.e. refraining from eating meat) on Good Friday; joining or watching a religious procession on Good Friday; and participating in the *salubong* (‘meeting up’) procession on Easter Sunday, where men join a procession carrying the image of Jesus Christ while women join a procession carrying the image

of the Virgin Mary and the two processions eventually meet at the town center. In some places in the Philippines, there is the practice of flagellation and, in the village of San Pedro Cutud, actual crucifixion of volunteer devotees during Good Friday. It must be noted that Holy Thursday and Good Friday are public holidays in the Philippines.

5. Celebrating the town fiesta in honor of the town's patron saint. There is a religious parade during the fiesta and families prepare special dishes with any fiesta goer, whether someone they know or not, feasting on these meals.
6. Visiting cemeteries and lighting up candles on graves of deceased relatives during Undas (also called Todos los Santos or All Saints Day) every November 1st.
7. Celebrating the Christmas season by hanging Christmas lanterns by the window of each house, and adorning the house with other Christmas decorations, such as a Christmas tree and a belen (miniature Bethlehem scene). Family members are expected to dine together for *noche buena* (literally 'good night') on Christmas eve. It is also common for children to go from house to house to sing Christmas carols and receive money or gifts in return. Christmas songs are regularly heard on radio, starting from September (the start

of the so-called 'ber' months) all the way to December. Devotees, especially among the young, attend the *simbang gabi* (dawn masses) for nine consecutive days starting on December 16th. Of course, family members are expected to hear mass together on Christmas Day. It must be noted that December 8 (Feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary) and December 25 (Christmas Day) are public holidays in the Philippines.

Aside from these events, there are other occasions that have some religious significance although it is not compulsory to participate in them. This includes the *Santacruzán*, a procession reenacting Queen Helen's search for the Holy Cross in Jerusalem, which is held in May. The most beautiful ladies of a village act as *Reyna Elena* (Queen Helen) or other queens during this procession-cum-beauty parade. There is also the *Flores de Mayo* (flowers of May) during which processions are held and churches are decorated with flowers.

The Covid-19 Pandemic

The first reported Covid-19 case in the Philippines was on January 21, 2020, when a Chinese woman arrived the country from Wuhan, China via Hong Kong. This individual was admitted to a government hospital on January 25 and found to be Covid positive. Although many sectors have

been calling for President Rodrigo Duterte to suspend flights from China and Hong Kong, President Duterte refused to heed the call, declaring that such a move was discriminatory to China.

It was only on March 15, 2020 when President Duterte imposed a partial lockdown in Metro Manila, the country's national capital region. Travel to and from Metro Manila were suspended. The next day, the entire island of Luzon, where Metro Manila is situated, was placed on "Community Quarantine", a euphemism for lockdown since the government didn't want to use the term 'lockdown'. However, by then the situation was too late. The number of Covid-19 cases already drastically increased. As the number of cases increased, several terms for various levels of lockdown were adopted by the government, such as "general community quarantine (GCQ)," "enhanced community quarantine (ECQ)," "modified enhanced community quarantine (MECQ)," and "modified general community quarantine (MGCQ)." These terms were too confusing to the point that people no longer knew what activities were allowed and which ones were not allowed for each category of "quarantine." Some quarters joked that the next category will be called "BBQ", referring to "barbeque." Fortunately, starting on February 27, 2022, the technical jargon for these types of

quarantines changed to Alert Levels 1 to 5, where level 1 is the lowest level of alert and level 5 the highest.

As of March 27, 2022, the number of Filipinos who got afflicted with the Covid-19 pandemic reached 3,676,991. The total number of deaths due to Covid-19 is 59,015. Metro Manila has the highest incidence of Covid-19 cases in the country followed by Central Luzon, the Southern Tagalog region, Central Visayas, and Western Visayas. All these regions are dominantly Catholic areas.

Lay Catholic Views on the Pandemic

While Covid-19 disease is a disease brought about by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, many Filipino Catholics consider the Covid-19 as a test of the people's faith. Unlike other religious denominations that consider the Covid-19 as a punishment from God, Filipino Catholics still believe that God loves people and that the pandemic is only a passing phase. Thus, there are no reported incidences of people renouncing their Catholic beliefs because of the pandemic. As a matter of fact, the pandemic brought about the further strengthening of the people's faith in God as manifested in the practice of their religious obligations during the pandemic. Were it not for the restrictions imposed on churches by the government, many among the Catholic faithful wanted to visit churches during

the pandemic. This was especially the case for Quiapo Church in Manila where many devotees go to during Fridays to hear mass and kiss the image of the Black Nazarene, which is believed to be a miraculous religious icon. However, policemen peacefully disperse crowds outside the church or remind people to practice physical distancing.

Impacts on Roman Catholics

Churches of whatever denomination, including Roman Catholic churches, were ordered closed by the government during the implementation of the lockdown from March 15, 2020 until May 14, 2020. Religious gatherings were not allowed during this time. Funerals were allowed but without a funeral wake. By May 15, 2020, the government allowed only five (5) persons inside churches. This was the time when many priests shifted to saying mass inside the church which were then broadcast through the Internet for those who wanted to hear mass. By July 2, 2020, churches were allowed to accept mass goers but only up to 10% of the maximum capacity of churches. This was increased to 30% capacity on October 22, 2020 and then to 50% seating capacity as of March 22, 2021. It was only last March 1, 2022 when all prohibitions on churches were allowed, except that church goers were still asked to wear masks and practice physical distancing.

With these restrictions, many Filipino Catholics have resorted to hearing mass online. Since there were many options on which online mass to attend to, Filipinos had the opportunity to hear mass from priests who are located in distant churches. People now had the chance to choose which priest they prefer to listen to unlike in the past where people mainly went to churches that were more accessible to them physically. Since people stayed at home during the lockdown period, many devotees had the opportunity to hear mass everyday and not just on Sundays. Attending online masses gave a sense of security to the Catholic faithful who were frightened of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Aside from hearing online masses, many Filipino Catholics also used their time at home to attend online Bible studies and online rosary prayers. One of my informants, who I shall call Noemi, attends the 7:00 a.m. and 12:00 noon masses and the 10:00 a.m. rosary prayer every day. In addition, she attends a Bible study every Friday.

There is a saying among Catholics that “The family that prays together stays together.” Going to mass, praying the rosary, and performing religious rituals was a collective family endeavor. However, most families could no longer do this during the Covid-19 pandemic as family members have been separated from one another due to having separate residences and because

of the government's ban on gatherings, including family gatherings. Because of this situation, the use of online conferencing apps, such as Zoom and Google Meet, became popular during the pandemic. Thus, people had the opportunity to virtually "come together" to hold religious celebrations on special occasions. Another informant, Marty, told me that they began to hold online family rosary prayers every Sunday even if his siblings, nephews, nieces, and in-laws are in different locations: in Muntinlupa City, Pasig City, and Quezon City in the Philippines as well as in Toronto, Canada. He recalled that during his childhood, they had face-to-face rosary prayers but when they grew up and got separate residences, this practice was stopped. Being at home during the pandemic gave them the opportunity to revive this family tradition but now done online.

For two years, i.e. from March 2020 until February 2022, Filipino families have been forced to stay at home due to the government-imposed lockdown. Thus, many families missed having Christmas meals together for two consecutive years. Many individuals failed to visit the graves of their loved ones because of the closing of cemeteries and the imposition of a cap on the number of visitors in cemeteries during the Undas. Many Filipino Catholics responded to the situation by having online family religious celebrations.

However, it's not all praying and being holy at home. Working parents and children worked online from home. Students and pupils also attended their online classes from home. Thus, family members competed with one another in using the computer and the Internet for each one's respective activity. Moreover, people easily get tired because they had to do household chores, such as cooking, cleaning the house, and washing clothes, while they work from home. Psychologically, the divide between work and home was disrupted by the 'work from home' arrangements. The home was traditionally a place to rest but during the pandemic, the problems previously encountered at work are transported to this resting place. It is in this context that the performance of online prayers and virtual masses were attributed to have a calming effect, akin to the effects of personal meditation.

The practice of religious activities was not totally hampered by the onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic. Filipino Catholics continued to practice their faith through the use of non-traditional means, such as the use of the Internet. However, the situation would have been easier if not for the stringent, if not inconsistent, measures imposed by the government. Church authorities questioned why churches have been placed on lockdown while casinos have been allowed to continue their operation. Moreover, priests were not

recognized as frontliners together with doctors, nurses, and policemen while people were also expecting spiritual aid from priests and other religious leaders. Majority of those who died due to Covid-19 did not receive Extreme Unction before their death. Extreme Unction is one of the seven blessed sacraments that Catholics may receive, together with Baptism, Confirmation, receiving the Eucharist, Reconciliation, the Holy Order (priesthood), and Matrimony. Extreme Unction is a ritual performed by the priest when anointing the sick, especially someone who is dying. There were documented cases where priests have been prevented from visiting dying Covid-19 patients in hospitals even if the patients were requesting to receive Extreme Unction.

Conclusion

Instead of questioning their faith during the Covid-19 pandemic, many Filipino Catholics strengthened their belief in God and considered the pandemic as just a test from God. They continued to perform their religious obligations despite the pandemic but this time through

new forms of performance, such as through online masses and virtual rituals and celebrations. These “new” religious acts are their means to cope with the pandemic. Instead of being pessimistic about the conditions and to overcome the stress brought about by the pandemic, Filipino Catholics used the situation to their advantage, i.e. spending their time while on lockdown to pray, study the Bible, and hear mass. This is a reflection of Filipino resiliency. Many studies have shown that in times of crises, Filipinos resort to spiritual activities in order to deal with the problems. These crisis situations may be brought about by natural calamities, such as typhoons, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions, or human-induced crises such as fires and armed conflict.

Since the Covid-19 problem has not yet been fully eradicated, there is a need to undertake continued research on how Filipinos use their spirituality to cope with the pandemic. There is also a need to investigate how people coming from other religious denominations, such as Muslim Filipinos and Filipino Protestants, addressed the Covid-19 pandemic. []

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