

## Correspondence

# ChurchInAction: the role of religious interventions in times of COVID-19

### ABSTRACT

In a recently published letter to the editor of this journal, the authors have called for the need to establish psychological support structures that cater to people's mental health in this time of the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic. To be more holistic, we extend this call to include people's spiritual well-being as well. We highlight the initiatives of the Philippines' religious sector. In particular, we report some of the interventions made by the Roman Catholic Church that have led to the social media hashtag, #ChurchInAction. These religious and spiritual interventions showcase the efforts of the Philippine Church and play an important role in providing assistance in time of public health crisis.

**Keywords** health services, organizations, public health

### To the editor

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has become a global health crisis, where, as of 21 May 2020, over 300 000 have died and almost 5 million people have been infected. In the Philippines, this translates into more than 13 000 infected and almost 900 deaths.<sup>1</sup> Amidst the crisis, a recent call was made for a need to cater not only to the public's physical health but also to their mental health.<sup>2</sup> We emphasize, however, that a similar call must be made for people's spiritual well-being as well.

In a country like the Philippines, where 81% of its >100 million population are Roman Catholics, religion plays an important role in people's daily lives.<sup>3</sup> But because of the government's lockdown policies, religious activities—such as Church masses—need to be cancelled to ensure public safety. This, however, puts a strain on many people who seek spiritual solace and guidance in times of health crisis.

Studies have shown the importance of spirituality in health care as it gives people stability and meaning.<sup>4</sup> Christina Puchalski, for example, enumerates its role in mortality, coping and recovery.<sup>5</sup> The physical aspects of illnesses and mental suffering call for a more compassionate type of health care, which involves walking with people 'in the midst of their pain'. As such, 'pastoral care and other spiritual services are an integral part of health care and daily life'. But with all the government lockdown policies, how could the public avail this spiritual support?

Catholic congregations in the Philippines have taken steps to provide the public with online-based Church masses, community prayers, spiritual recollections and retreats and eucharistic adoration and processions. Also, people dealing with issues about mortality, coping and recovery are provided with online formative counselling and pastoral guidance.<sup>6</sup> Aside from these spiritually uplifting programmes, the Catholic Church has also provided personal protective equipment and face masks to health workers, initiated feeding programmes to the poor and has opened its doors to the homeless.<sup>7,8</sup> From a theological point of view, such initiatives are inspired by the 3-fold mission of Christ as king, prophet and priest.<sup>9</sup>

The Catholic Church's initiatives have not gone unnoticed, however. Philippine netizens have been moved and to signify support, some have shared the hashtag #ChurchInAction on social media.<sup>10</sup> These posts showcase the efforts of religious groups to ease the impact of the current crisis, and reflect how netizens perceive a Church that is dynamic and attune to the signs of the times.<sup>11</sup>

It is evident that religious and spiritual interventions play a crucial role in this public health crisis. They guide people to find meaning and acceptance in the midst of suffering while engaging in the deepest questions of life.<sup>12</sup> They provide counsel, refuge, hope and rejuvenation for those who need it. The COVID-19 crisis calls upon all the members of the 'global village' to 'understand, learn lessons, reflect and

reprioritize<sup>13</sup> all aspects of our lives—the physical, the mental and the spiritual.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

F.A.d.C. did the conceptualization, H.T.B. the writing of the original draft and J.J.B.J. reviewed and edited the manuscript.

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