

Becoming a Church of the Poor in the New Normal in Light of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach

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Abstract: The recent experience with COVID-19, a pandemic that has further exposed the vulnerabilities of the poor in Philippine society, provides a socio-political and economic context for a re-emphasis of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines' (PCP II) Church of the Poor (COP). This paper argues that the crisis brought about by the pandemic affirms the importance of the COP but at the same time it provides a context to further deepen our understanding on what else can be done by a COP. To carry out the objective, Amartya Sen's definition of poverty that focuses on capabilities instead of income is used for synthetic analysis of poverty's face as it was experienced during the pandemic. This is used to further analyze how the Philippine Church can rekindle its commitment to be a Church of the Poor in the new normal.

Keywords: COVID-19 • Church of the Poor • New Normal • Capability Approach

Introduction

The year 2021 has been considered special by the Catholic Church in the Philippines as it marks the 500th year of the arrival of Christianity in its shores.¹ This was

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¹ The term Church in this work is broadly understood as the hierarchy, mainly the bishops with the priests. Sometimes, the CBCP

since 1521 when Portuguese navigator Ferdinand Magellan, carrying the Spanish flag, came to the Philippines and baptized a group of natives who became the first Christians in the archipelago. However, another important anniversary that is practically eclipsed by the quinentennial of Philippine Christianity is the thirtieth anniversary of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) convoked in 1991. Practically paled by the 1521 commemoration, the Philippine Church in general has apparently not given much attention to PCP II.² This, however, is lamentable because of what the council waded through the bishops, clergy, the religious, and the lay who attended it:

What then is the Church of the Poor? It means a Church that embraces and practices the evangelical spirit of poverty, which combines detachment from possessions with a profound trust in the Lord as the

or hierarchy is used interchangeably with “Church.” The author is aware that ecclesologically the concept of the Church (the Roman Catholic Church) includes both the ordained and the lay. However, the term is given a more particular meaning in order to highlight the specific location of the hierarchy (i.e. the bishops) in the analysis of structure, power relations, and the authorship of discourses which practically exclude the laity in the real and practical sphere of the Church. For points related to this see Antonio Moreno, SJ, *Church Society in Postauthoritarian Philippines: Narratives of Engaged Citizenship* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2008), 6-7.

² This does not mean that PCP II does not have any significance to the actual life of local Churches. Apparently, evidences show that the spirit of the Council has an impact in some dioceses. See Karl Gaspar, “Basic Ecclesial Communities in Mindanao: A Call to Continuing Missiological Relevance,” *MST Review* 19/1 (2016): 37-66. According to Gaspar, “PCP II led to the full promotion of the setting up of the BECs in the Philippines; henceforth most dioceses in the country were encouraged to move towards this pastoral direction” (p. 38). Also see Ferdinand D. Dagmang, “From Vatican II to PCP II to BEC Too: Progressive Localization of a New State of Mind to a New State of Affairs,” *MST Review* 18/2 (2016): 63-75.

sole source of salvation. ... The Church of the Poor is one whose members and leaders have a special love for the poor. ... The Church of the poor will mean that the pastors and other Church leaders will give preferential attention and time to those who are poor, and will generously share of their own resources in order to alleviate their poverty and make them recognize the love of the Lord for them despite their poverty.³

Historians may argue that PCP II is not as historically significant as 1521. But in a theological and pastoral sense it is a landmark in the Philippine Church's renewal as it was, in essence, the Filipino people's reception of Vatican II.⁴ In PCP II, the Philippine bishops have expressed commitment to lead the Church with and for the poor. Since PCP II, various pastoral letters on poverty have been issued and pronounced under different leaderships of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP).

Forward to 2020, a catastrophic year for all peoples, the poor have again become the highlight as they suffer most because of an unexpected pandemic, COVID-19. Governments were forced to impose lockdowns more known to Filipinos as the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ). When cases of COVID-19 gradually surged in some parts of the Philippines, the imposition of the ECQ highlighted the depth and extent of poverty among Filipinos.

The succeeding discussion looks into the various specific aspects where the poor are most vulnerable during the pandemic and because of the lockdowns that were imposed by the government. Then, departing from

³ See Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippine (Pasay: St. Paul's, 1992), Part II (Church Renewed), 125 – 136. Henceforth shall be cited as PCP II.

⁴ Luis Antonio Tagle, "What Have We Become? Ten Years after PCP II," *Landas* 16/1 (2002): 108-111.

the social analysis of such an experience, the discussion will further move to how a Church of the Poor can once more reaffirm and re-invigorate its ecclesial commitment institutionalized in PCP II 1991.

Discussion Framework: The Church, Poverty, and the Poor

The Church of the Poor and the Meaning of Poverty

We begin this section with a delimitation: that our main concern is primarily on the theory (behind the discourse) of poverty and only secondarily whatever sound practice or advocacy should stem from it. In this light, the importance of a COP in a time of pandemic presupposes the necessity of asking the question who are the poor and primordially what is poverty or how do we or should we conceptualize poverty?

The said questions are important because apparently poverty is not an uncommon word in the Church's discourses and pastoral concern. It has many definitions and there are many approaches to it as there are biases among analysts, and this does not exclude the Church. Church leaders "speak about the poor much as social scientists and economists do."⁵ There is no question, for example, that there is a theological and biblical basis for a preferential option for the poor but who exactly are the poor that we call our own and how do we know that rightly they are the poor to whom the Church devotes its preferential mission? For the question to mean more than its rhetorical value both the question and the one asking it should be informed by a sound perspective on poverty or concept of poverty or else the whole (ecclesial)

⁵ Rhoderick John S. Abellanos, "Poverty of Words in Poverty Discourses: The Case of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines," *Philippine Sociological Review*, 61/1 (2014): 177.

discourse would be just a bundle of exhortations lacking in creative and transforming power.⁶

Though arguably the end of all concern for the poor and their poverty is to be uplifted from destitution, but this can only succeed if an employed strategy begins with the right perspective of poverty – what it is and what it is not. This way we would be able to answer, with greater confidence, the question: “[d]o prophets have useful things to say to politicians about appropriate policies toward the poor?”⁷

Constitutive of and central to PCP II’s vision of renewal is to become a Church of the Poor.⁸ Within the economic and political context of the country this means, among others, that the Church is actively involved in the fight against structural injustice and that the poor would feel at home with their Church as shown in their active participation in its life and mission.⁹ Precisely, the

⁶ We borrow the wordings of Aloysius L. Cartagenas in his work on the hermeneutic of Catholic Social Teaching. See Aloysius Lopez Cartagenas, *Unlocking the Church’s Best Kept Secret* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2012), 28. To paraphrase Cartagenas: How then are we to “rescue the meaning” of the Church of the Poor “from its limitations in the definitions and conceptualizations of various hierarchical texts and pronouncements in their varied limitations?”

⁷ Mary Jo Bane and Lawrence Mead, *Lifting Up the Poor: A Dialogue on Religion, Poverty and Welfare Reform* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 2003), 1.

⁸ See Ferdinand Dagmang, “From Vatican II to PCP II to BEC Too: Progressive Localization of a New State of Mind to a New State of Affairs,” *MST Review*, 18/2 (2016): 63-75; this article emphasizes that the Church of the Poor, as a principle/vision, may be made concrete through the Basic Ecclesial Communities. As PCP II states: “Our vision of the Church as communion, participation, and mission, about the Church as priestly, prophetic and kingly people, and as a Church of the Poor –a Church that is renewed – is today finding expression in one ecclesial movement. This is the movement to foster Basic Ecclesial Communities.” (PCP II 137), underscoring added.

⁹ Apparently there are many other dimensions of being a COP such as: (1) the embrace and practice of the evangelical spirit of

structural injustices have become more tangible as the country grapples with economic survival due to COVID-19. From the issue of the country's poor healthcare system to the increasing displacement of laborers, the question now is how shall a Church that vowed to prefer to walk in solidarity with the poor move forward in its ministry and mission? Here we are invited to revisit the very word "poverty."¹⁰

Poverty: Lack of Capabilities, Unfreedoms and its Multi-dimensions

There are many definitions of poverty as there are approaches to measure it as a phenomenon and condition. Nevertheless, we are going to use Amartya Sen's notion of poverty as *capability deprivation* which goes beyond its common definition as lack or lowness of

poverty, (2) the special love for the poor by both its leaders (hierarchy) and members (laity), (3) the non-discrimination of the poor simply because of their poverty which requires a review of the Church's own structures and practices related to temporalities, (4) pastors would give preferential attention to the poor including the generous sharing of resources if only to alleviate poverty, (5) the practice of solidarity with the poor especially those afflicted by misery, (6) the poor themselves becoming evangelizers and not merely being treated as subjects of evangelization, (7) an orientation and tilt of the Church's center of gravity in favor of the needy, and (8) the willingness to follow Jesus Christ through poverty and oppression. See PCP II, 125-136, related topics are also mentioned in part III of the Conciliar Document, i.e. peasants (390), urban poor (392), fisherfolk (394), and disabled (399).

¹⁰ After all, pastoral, theological, or moral discourse are not privileged language that are immune from the teaching-learning process of an evolving world. From this critique we proceed to how the Church in the new normal can revitalize its discourse on poverty in a manner that is more relevant and connected to the people that it ministers. See Rhoderick John S. Abellanos, "Poverty of Words in Poverty Discourses: The Case of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines," *Philippine Sociological Review*, 61/1 (2014): 177.

income, (which has become the standard criterion of identification of poverty).¹¹ In an essay on Sen and Catholic Social Thought, Verstraeten gives a sound explanation why the perspectives of the economist and moral philosopher are enriching to the dynamic nature of the Church's faith-based tradition.¹²

The capability approach to poverty is underpinned by economic and ethical arguments that critique the minimalist and reductionist (income-based poverty) definition which cannot serve as basis for a robust analysis of people's lives and conditions. The philosophy behind this however is summarized in how our economist-philosopher explains the relationship between income and achievements, between commodities and capabilities, and between wealth and our ability to live as we would like.¹³ Economic growth both in the micro and macro levels cannot sensibly be treated as an end in itself.¹⁴ The desire to have more wealth is not the end in itself. To desire wealth for its own sake does not make sense. The drive to earn money is connected to a higher value and that is to live a good life, understood in Sen's terms as capabilities. "Expanding the freedoms that we have reason to value not only makes our lives richer and

¹¹ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Oxford, 1999), 19-20, 87-92. Also see by the same author *The Idea of Justice* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 254-257. A similar treatment on the topic related to income and wellbeing is found in A. Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (New York: Russell Sage/Harvard, 1995), 28-30.

¹² Johan Verstraeten, "Catholic Social Thought and Amartya Sen on Justice," Peter Rona and Laszlo Zsolnai, eds., *Economics as a Moral Science* (Switzerland: Springer, 2017), 222.

¹³ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 13

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14. Precisely why even in the macroeconomic level, Sen (together with Joseph Stiglitz and Jean-Paul Fitoussi) would argue that conventional economic measures such as Gross Domestic Product does not and cannot capture quality of life or subjective well-being. See Joseph Stiglitz, A. Sen and J-P Fitoussi. *Mis-measuring our Lives: Why GDP Doesn't Add Up* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 64-65.

more unfettered, but also allows us to be fuller social persons, exercising our own volitions and interacting with – influencing – the world in which we live.”¹⁵

In a later work, *The Idea of Justice*, Sen explains that not even the availability of resources would serve as a guarantee of fuller wellbeing. Simply put, an income that is way above the minimum wage may not automatically mean that one is not poor. There is a variability in the relationship between resources and poverty, one that is deeply contingent on the characteristics of the respective people and the environment in which they live both natural and social.¹⁶ This is an important point to highlight because one has to realize, as the discussion unfolds, that in reality – as it is in many countries – the poor are not just those who live below the poverty line. And as Sen would put it, real poverty (understood in terms of capability deprivation) may be much more intense than what we can deduce from income data.¹⁷

The foregoing frames our interpretation or analysis of the poor’s experience in a time of pandemic. By analyzing and reflecting on the condition of the poor beyond income we get to create a gestalt of their interconnected unfreedoms. The lack or absence of capabilities are basically limitations that are not only economic but also social and political in nature causing and creating more disabilities on the part of the poor, and furthermore preventing them from achieving those things that they find more reason to value in life.

At this juncture the discussion turns to the face of poverty in a time of pandemic specifically within the context of the Philippine experience when the Enhanced Community Quarantine was enforced and thereby

¹⁵ Ibid., 14-15.

¹⁶ Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 254.

¹⁷ Ibid., 256.

imposing many limitations on the lives of the Filipinos.

The Face of Poverty in a Time of Pandemic: What it Means to be Poor in a Time of Crisis

Poverty in the Philippines: The Figures

Poverty incidence in the Philippines is at 16.6%, which means that 17.6 million Filipinos are poor.¹⁸ According to the Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA] a family of five (5) needs around 10,727 PhP to meet their minimum basic food and non-food needs. With the same family size 7,528 PhP per month is needed to meet food needs. Supplementing this income-based measure of poverty is the self-rated survey on poverty by the Social Weather Stations which as of December 2019 reports that 54% among Filipino families consider themselves as *mahirap* or poor. The estimated numbers of Self-Rated Poor families are 13.1 million for December and 10.3 million for September. The latest Self-Rated Poverty rate is the highest since the 55% in September 2014.¹⁹

The figures above are intended to basically provide a measurable starting point. But as has been established earlier it is also important to analyze the interconnected unfreedoms of the poor. In fact, a reading of poverty using

¹⁸ Philippine Statistics Authority, “Proportion of Poor Filipinos Estimated at 16.6 percent in 2018” [available online]: <https://psa.gov.ph/poverty-press-releases/nid/144752>.

¹⁹ Social Weather Stations, “Fourth Quarter 2019 Social Weather Survey: Self-Rated Poverty rises by 12 points to 5-year-high 54%” [available online]: <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcldisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20200123140450>. In terms of the capacity to purchase food, SWS in its December 2019 survey found that 35% of families rate their food as Mahirap or Poor, termed by SWS as Food-Poor. This is 6 points above the 29% in September 2019. The estimated numbers of Food-Poor families are 8.6 million in December and 7.1 million in September.

capability as a criterion would highlight that in the face of a pandemic there are also some, if not many, wage earners who are placed in a vulnerable situation because the paralysis caused by the ECQ increased their unfreedoms, incapability, and deprivation. This brings us to a discussion on poverty as a phenomenon with various dimensions: poverty in terms of location, weak housing materials, vulnerability to exploitation, powerlessness, and proneness to human rights violations.²⁰

Poverty has a Location: The Issue of Housing

It was perceived during the pandemic that Filipinos and many among the poor were unruly and thus non-compliant of government restrictions. The common observation was that those who live in slums or in urban poor communities were stubborn in following the imposed guidelines from national and local governments especially in terms of social distancing and curfew. Apparently, the several weeks of ECQ highlighted the bias of some Filipinos who belong to the middle and high income classes against the poor especially in highly urbanized cities like Metro Manila and Metro Cebu.²¹

People's responses to the government's ECQ varied depending on their economic capabilities. Physical distancing was not hard to comply for those who have enough space but not for those who live in densely

²⁰ Robert Chambers, "Poverty and Livelihood: Whose Reality Counts?" in *Environment and Urbanization* 7(1): 175. Also, R. Chambers, "What is Poverty? Who Asks? Who Answers?" in *Poverty in Focus* (Dec 2006): 3-4.

²¹ Take the case of Sitio Zapatera, Barrio Luz in Cebu City. See Marit Stinus-Cabugon, "135 Covid-19 cases in Cebu City neighborhood" [available online]: <https://www.manilatimes.net/2020/04/20/opinion/columnists/135-covid-19-cases-in-cebu-city-neighborhood/716241/>

populated urban poor communities. The location and arrangement of the houses of the poor do not follow the same formalities and luxuries in spacing, symmetry and of course the quality of materials with those who belong to the middle class or high income brackets.²² Precisely why the strict observance of the ECQ was relatively not difficult to observe by the middle class and the rich. But this was not the case with households with ten family members in a thirty square meter room.

COVID-19 magnified the material face of poverty. It was very clear in the experience of the urban poor that being poor is not just about lack or absence of income but the vulnerability to all forms of threats. The pandemic made the lives of the poor more difficult in various counts. First, they were forced to stay at home which, unlike the rich or the middle class, literally meant being imprisoned in a practically paralyzing situation. Second, the set-up of their villages was a factor that increased the probability of transmission. In Cebu City, the pattern obviously revealed that the concentration of the cases were mostly in slums packed with people.²³

The COVID-19 pandemic lays bare before our eyes that affordable housing is a serious problem in the Philippines. According to Arcilla, “the lack of affordability is a persistent problem in socialized housing programs in the Philippines. Affordability is a critical component of the right to adequate housing. Without access to affordable housing, the poor are forced to create

²² Robert Chambers, “Participation, Pluralism and Perceptions of Poverty: a Conference Paper” in *Paper for the International Conference on Multidimensional Poverty*: Brasilia August 29-31 2005, p. 14.

²³ Ryan Macasero and Michael Bueza “MAP: Where are the coronavirus cases in Cebu City?” [available online]: <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/260554-map-coronavirus-cases-cebu-city>

homes in unsafe spaces and in slums.”²⁴ Since the late 1990s the government has estimated some 700,000 units for Metro Manila, and approximately three (3) million in the entire Philippines.²⁵ Sadly, it has been an unsolved problem passed on from one administration to another. Despite the promises of past administrations (e.g. President Estrada who was most popular in his pro-poor campaign advocacy) many Filipinos have remained without decent homes or places of dwelling.

The poor population management strategy of the government (not to mention that delayed legislation of the Reproductive Health law) has exacerbated the problem of congestion in urban areas. The National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) reported an estimated backlog of over 900,000 units between 2005 and 2010. Already in 1994, economist Arsenio Balisacan emphasized the correlation between housing and health, which according to him (and this was decade ago) are growing concerns of the poor rapidly urbanizing areas.²⁶ Logically, there is an inverse relationship between the quality of housing and the chances of vulnerability to health hazards, and this is something felt more intensely by the urban poor during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Economic Exploitation

In a trickle-down economy, any crisis that would hit the main economic drivers would automatically sacrifice the poor who are low income, daily wage, or seasonal

²⁴ Chester Antonino Arcilla, “Ensuring the affordability of socialized housing: Towards liveable and sustainable homes for the poor,” *UP CIDS Policy Brief* 2019-15, 1.

²⁵ Edna Co, et al., *Philippine Democracy Assessment: Economic and Social Rights* (Pasig: Anvil, 2007), 47.

²⁶ Arsenio Balisacan, *Poverty, Urbanization and Development* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 1994), 77-78.

earners. The ECQ due to Covid-19 hit hardest vendors, tricycle, and *habal-habal* drivers, and small-time mechanics. In effect their powerlessness was highlighted – concrete in the face of income-less citizens who would be dependent on government subsidies and prone to political manipulation. In its March 19, 2020 impact assessment, the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) forecasted that given the “simultaneous adverse effects on the supply and the demand side of the economy” the Philippines should expect “a cumulative loss of PHP428.7 to PHP 1,355.6 billion in gross value added (in current prices).” This would be “equivalent to 2.1 to 6.6 percent of nominal GDP in 2020.” NEDA further added that “without mitigating measures, this would imply a reduction in the Philippine’s real GDP growth to -0.6 to 4.3 percent in 2020.”

Consequent to economic losses would be displacement of labor. As early as April 2020, the Department of Labor and Employment’s (DOLE) Job Displacement Monitoring Report registered a total of 108,620 workers from 2,317 establishments affected due to the implementation of Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) and Temporary Closure (TC).²⁷ Uncertainty in the government’s aid and subsidy were issues among low-income families. Displaced workers who had to continue feeding their family had to partly if not largely rely on the assistance of the government. When the ECQ, for example, was implemented on March 28, some people in Cebu City,

²⁷ Either the workers earned less due to the adjustment of the work scheme or schedule or did not earn at all. Around 889 establishments with 41,311 workers implemented FWAs while 368 companies engaged in reduction of workdays, affected 15,556 workers. Other companies also imposed forced leave. Around 9,941 workers were without work from around 225 companies while 58 other companies with 3,655 employees were also affected by the anti-virus measures.

without hesitation, went to their barangay hall in order to inquire about the ECQ pass and the subsidies or allowances. Issues and concerns about the Social Amelioration Package (SAP) became divisive points among social classes.

It is easy to just follow the government's policies if there is trust but sadly this is not the case with many Filipinos in relation to their leaders. Given this context, again, the poor were labelled as ignorant and disobedient to rules. This was very much concrete when Barangay Luz of Cebu City was first announced to have a surge of COVID-19 positive cases among its residence. Comments such as (in Cebuano) *kining mga squatter gahi gyud ug ulo* (these informal settles are hard-headed or stubborn) and *bogo gyud ning mga tawhana* (these people are dumb) were all around social media. But the people who were called stubborn and dumb were the same masses who cheered for the politicians during elections. Sadly, these are the people who are continually exploited as warm bodies in a populist-based politics. There were reports, for example, that some barangays required a voter's identification (ID) card as requirement for government assistance. "Dispersed and anxious as they are about access to resources, work and income, it is difficult for them [the poor] to organize or bargain. Often physically weak and economically vulnerable, they lack influence. Subject to the power of others, they are easy to ignore or exploit. Powerlessness is also, for the powerful, the least acceptable point of intervention to improve the lot of the poor."²⁸

It was easy for some Filipinos to just say that a total lockdown or even a martial law should be implemented in order to save everyone. But this was according to those who lived with safety nets in their socio-economic

²⁸ Chambers, *Poverty and Livelihood*, 190.

security (savings, continual income, investments, networks and connections). These people need not worry so much about life's burdens caused by the ineffective and inefficient state bureaucracy.

Powerlessness: Humiliation and Human Rights Violations

The material conditions of the poor made them more prone to abuses by the police or officers of the law during the ECQ.²⁹ Sen explains: "...destitution can produce provocation for defying established laws and rules."³⁰ The lack or even absence of any capability and capacity to push their agenda made the poor subject to various layers of political and even legal abuse.³¹

This was the experience with some residents of San Roque, a slum area in Quezon City. They were dispersed and some twenty-one (21) were jailed after *Kadamay*, an activist group, was accused to have incited them to turn against the government.³² Then there was the incident in Parañaque City that involved the alleged "torture" of curfew violators. Allegedly the violators were made to sit under the sun for an hour. The barangay captain of Barangay San Isidro clarified that he did not punish the

²⁹ See Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa, "Poverty's Political Face in a Slum: Focus on Human Rights" in *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 39 [2011]: 149 – 162. Also see R.J.S. Abellanosa, "The Political Face of Poverty: Cases of Human Rights Violations in Pasil, Cebu City" in *Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 2/2 (2011): 132-148.

³⁰ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence* (New York: Norton, 2006), 142-143.

³¹ According to Sen, "poverty and inequality closely relate to each other" in *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (New York: Oxford, 1981), 23.

³² CNN Philippines, "21 protesters demanding food aid arrested in Quezon City" [available online]: <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/4/1/quezon-city-protesters-arrested-.html>

violators as there were merely asked to “stay outside the barangay hall to maintain social distancing while their names were being taken.”³³ One of those arrested (alias John) said: “It’s easy for some people not to go outside because they have food and money. But there are people like me who need to go outside to work so we can eat something for the day.”

Clearly, the poor can easily become victims of the power that is meant to guide and protect them. Without power and influence, plus ignorance, joblessness, and greater vulnerability to diseases, the poor have little chance of asserting their rights most especially in the most difficult situations.³⁴

It can be tentatively concluded at this point that the experience of the Filipino poor during the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the gaps and failures of a state that claims to govern democratically. Such failure is explainable by the fact that the universal value of democracy is more than just being a mere mechanism of maintaining political representation and power transmission. Democracy, and election as a core element of it, should translate to people’s achievements of greater capabilities through social and economic rights, and thus give them greater reason to continually appreciate their freedom not only as an instrument to achieve certain ends (in life) but also as an end in itself.³⁵ Elections and the whole idea and practice of representation are just aspects of democracy among others. In Sen’s words:

³³ Dexter Cabalza, “Paranaque village chief accused of ‘torturing’ curfew violators” [available online]: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1248527/paranaque-village-chief-accused-of-torturing-curfew-violators>

³⁴ See R.J.S. Abellanos, “Poverty’s Political Face in a Slum: Focus on Human Rights.” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 39 (2011):154-160.

³⁵ Amartya Sen, “Democracy as a Universal Value,” *Journal of Democracy* 10/3 (1999): 11.

...even elections can be deeply defective if they occur without the different sides getting an adequate opportunity to present their respective cases, or without the electorate enjoying the freedom to obtain news and to consider the views of the competing protagonists. Democracy is a demanding system, and not just a mechanical condition (like majority rule) taken in isolation.³⁶

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic more specifically the sustained crisis which the poor have undergone, capabilities, understood within the framework of Sen's philosophy, means the facilitation by the very democratic process and its translation ultimately to the citizens' achievement of capabilities that are necessary for the expansion of freedoms. This means the minimization of poverty as a condition of incapability. This means, concretely, the people's greater chances to: access to housing, transportation, healthcare particularly hospitalization, food and water security, education, and stable employment. Apparently, these social needs have been part of the promises of politicians during elections. Sadly, they continue to capitalize on the lack or the absence of basic services thus perpetuating people's patronage and dependence on non-systematized government assistance oftentimes disguised as charity. Consequently, elections are practically ceremonial formalities that exacerbate our dysfunctional democracy.³⁷

³⁶ Ibid., 9.

³⁷ See Jane Hutchison, "The 'Disallowed' Political Participation of Manila's Urban Poor," *Democratization* 14/5 (2007): 853-872. Hutchison has aptly described the situation: "the alternative modes of political participation – of a societal incorporation type – are created that assume policy consensus and interest convergence over social inclusion taking a particular, neo-liberal, path that effectively limits the urban poor's entitlements to the securitisation of their own self-built shelters" (p. 868).

Poverty is a word commonly used and discussed during the election period and largely exploited by politicians in order to gain support from the masses. Sadly, people's access to decent housing, transportation, healthcare particularly hospitalization, food and water security, education, and stable employment remain largely and extensively unmet. After elections, officials of both national and local governments would be busy with day-to-day politics. The multidimensional experiences of vulnerability and poverty among some Filipinos in the face of a crisis further highlights the deficiencies of Philippine democracy specifically in the inadequacy or absence of basic services.

The Church of the Poor: A Critique of Three-Decade Ecclesial Discourse in Light of the COVID-19 Experience

The Church has a prophetic role in the political sphere rooted in the Gospel values. To borrow the words of Jacques Maritain on democracy, we may, in essence, speak of the same with politics: "it cannot do without the prophetic factor, and that the people need a prophet."³⁸ Precisely why there is a need for a critical analysis and reflection on where the COP, since PCP II, could also have focused its engagement with the government and thus helped generate and strengthen the advancement of people's right to social and economic welfare. After all, if politics ought to actualize humanity's moral and ethical persuasions, then the Church must meet those who are in a position of power in that point where politics and morality intersect. To rephrase a moral theologian: it is never enough (for the Church) to just notice those whom

³⁸ Jacques Maritain, "The Democratic Character," Robert Caponigri, ed. *Modern Catholic Thinkers, vol. II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 350.

others would rather not, and look ‘preferentially’ at their concerns. The added task is to ensure that the poor whatever dehumanized faces they may wear be encountered less as objects of pity but more as interacting subjects.³⁹

An Examination of Priorities and Discourses

In 2012, the CBCP through Cebu Archbishop Jose Palma, issued a *Pastoral Exhortation on the Era of New Evangelization*.⁴⁰ The document explains the Philippine Church’s preparations for the quincentennial celebration in 2021 and acknowledges the continuity in the local Church’s thrust from PCP II up to the present. It underscores that constitutive of evangelization is, among others, the “imperative of ‘bringing Good News to the poor’ (*pauperes evangelizantur*).”⁴¹ In fact, the CBCP did not deny that the Philippine Church still has “a long way from the vision to becoming in truth a ‘church of the poor’—committed to struggle to bring down poverty among our people, committed to striving to do all we can to help bring about ‘a civilization of justice and love’.” According to the Exhortation:

The Year of the Poor is “dedicated to committing ourselves more firmly to our vision of becoming truly a Church of the Poor. The new evangelization is also a

³⁹ Dionisio M. Miranda, “What will You Have Me Do for You? The Theological Ethics Agenda from an Asian Perspective,” James Keenan, ed., *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church: The Plenary Papers from the First Cross Cultural Conference on Catholic Theological Ethics* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2008), 178.

⁴⁰ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, “CBCP Pastoral Exhortation on the Era of New Evangelization (longer version)” in <http://cbcponline.net/cbcp-pastoral-exhortation-on-the-era-of-new-evangelization-longer-version/>, access 1 May 2020.

⁴¹ Ibid.

powerful call from the Lord to follow in His footsteps to be evangelically poor. How far have we journeyed to our vision of Church? How shall we assist the materially poor to face the challenges of hunger and poverty, of globalization and climate change? And together with them eradicate the evil of corruption and the economic and political imbalances of our society? At the same time we realize that the materially poor in our midst have the God-given power to tell the story of the poor Christ who by His poverty liberates and enriches us. The whole Church, rich and poor, powerful and powerless, have to be in solidarity in the work of restoring integrity and truth, justice and peace – love – in our benighted land.⁴²

Apparently, the bishops did not fail to mention the poor in their pronouncements. The year 2015 was, in fact, declared as the Year of the Poor.⁴³ But five years since then, and most especially in light of the current experience of COVID-19, what has happened to the poor? What was the significance and the impact of the Church's pronounced commitment to work in solidarity for the restoration of justice and peace in our land? In hindsight, it can be said that although it is not fair to say that the Church has taken for granted the poor but neither is it not unfair to say that the Church has not said enough for the poor that it has identified to be its own in PCP II. It is true that within the Church there are religious congregations and sectors who have done genuine service to the poor. For example, Catholic educational institutions through the community extension services, social action and outreach programs have helped so many among those who are least in society in more ways than one. However, it is one thing to speak of these *ad intra institutions* and their initiatives, it is another thing to

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

speak of the Church specifically its leadership and how it deals with poverty as a social issue and as a systemic problem of the country.

Apparently, poverty is not a top priority in the CBCP's pastoral agenda as evidenced by its documents or pronouncements. In a study on Episcopal Conferences and their theory and praxis based on Catholic social teaching, Terence McGoldrick observes that the statements on CST by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) "dropped from an average of 2.1 per year over the 1990s to 1.5 per year from 2000 to 2012."⁴⁴ PCP II (around 1991 up to 1992) according to the author marks the surge in lengthy statements. However, the years that follow especially those closer to present have seen the change in discursive style wherein the bishops would typically issue one-page statements that focus on particular issues or events like elections, nuclear power plants, and tax law. Furthermore, in the past 12 years, the brief statements by the CBCP "have appeared at about twice the rate of the longer statements (2.8 vs. 1.5 per year)."⁴⁵ McGoldrick adds that the statements of the CBCP "indicate trust and cooperation among the bishops and the EC president and staff, after decades of contending on these sensitive social issues. They do not require a plenary meeting or consultative process and allow the Church to have a voice in the regular flow of events in local society."⁴⁶

The approach to poverty in the Church's discourses basically shows lack of focus in its treatment of the issue. If we trace the continuum of the Church's discourse back to PCP II, it can be said that the post-PCP II concerns of

⁴⁴ Terence McGoldrick, "Episcopal Conferences Worldwide and Catholic Social Thought, in Theory and Praxis: An Update," *Theological Studies* 75/2 (2014): 382.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

the Church have practically detoured from the vision of the plenary council and it can be rightly said that becoming a Church of the Poor has remained largely an unfinished project. The vision of the Philippine Church according to the Acts and Decrees of PCP II did not “just aim at sustaining the usual charitable activities of the Church which has been around since the time of the first mendicant friars.”⁴⁷ The preferential option waged in 1991 was in itself a theology of liberation which in essence proposed a commitment to “combat the systemic and structural dimensions of poverty.”⁴⁸

A survey of the documents issued by the CBCP from 1991 up to 2011 would reveal that even after PCP II the discourses (pastoral letters and exhortations) do not form a single, coherent and consistent empirically grounded hierarchical discourse on poverty (the closest could be the Exhortation on the Philippine Economy). Apparently, the pastoral letters and exhortations were written by different CBCP presidents and it goes without saying that their substance and style, as it appears, vary from one conference leadership to another. They were responses to specific issues within a particular socio-political and economic context. Hence, despite the Philippine hierarchy’s passionate discourses against poverty not one of the documents can be taken as the sole concrete framework which the CBCP may use in order to understand the problem of poverty. It is in fact puzzling how the CBCP can continue talking about poverty, siding with the poor, and condemning government programs for being anti-poor without a minimum standard concept or definition of poverty.

Prior to COVID-19, the Church’s estrangement from

⁴⁷ Rhoderick John S. Abellanos, “Discursive Detours and Weak Gatekeeping: The Deficit of the Philippine Bishops’ Church of the Poor Discourse,” *Political Theology* 16/3 (2015): 230.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 230-231.

its people was increasing. The sustained support to President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs by Catholic Filipinos no less shows the contrast between the said to be deep Filipino religiosity on the one hand and their disconnect from the official theological paradigm of the hierarchy on the other. One cannot but wonder why the Church especially the bishops continue to talk about the poor; but then who are these poor that they are talking about?

In Search for a Church of the Poor: A Challenge to the Philippine Church Leadership

The ambivalent political behavior of the Philippine hierarchy (CBCP) with the different presidential administrations can be accounted for the incoherent attitude and approach towards its own commitment to be a Church of the Poor. Even a synthetic rundown of how the Church politically positioned itself in recent years, show that in several instances poverty is not always a top priority in comparison to the other interests of the hierarchy. After EDSA Dos in 2001 the Church distanced itself from politics under the presidency of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.⁴⁹ Her concessionary attitude towards the bishops pushed back the needed pressure from the Church to advance some of the social reforms in the country that were long overdue. Under the presidency of Benigno Aquino III from 2010 up to 2016, the bishops were focused in fighting against the Reproductive Health bill. The issue on reproductive health could have been an opportunity for a more serious dialogue on the problem of poverty in the Philippines. The Church could have

⁴⁹ R.J.S. Abellanosa, *Discursive Detours and Weak Gatekeeping*, 234. Also see Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa, "The CBCP and Philippine Politics: 2005 and After," *Asia Pacific Social Science Review*, Vol. 8/1 (2008): 73-88.

interrogated the government's population agenda in light of the Church's teaching on integral development. In fact, the Church could have come to the defense of the poor by asking the government if it has concrete parallel developmental plans on how to help the poor other than just promoting women's rights through RH devices.

Unfortunately, the bishops were more focused on what would become an ideological theme of "pro-life versus pro-choice." The hierarchy and their supporters including the lay who can be classified as "*churched*" were more concerned with defending the family, protecting the sanctity of marriage and virginity, among others. The purist theological paradigm that dominated the discourse of the hierarchy especially during the first years of Benigno Aquino's administration contributed to the Church's further alienation from its people. It became clear that many of the clergy were more concerned with their interests and could afford to disregard the signs of the times when pushed to the defensive in terms of its own agenda.⁵⁰

Then Rodrigo Duterte came to power and practically overturned the system left by the previous administration. The focus of the political debate has shifted to the need to end the proliferation of illegal drugs vis-à-vis human rights. With a total commitment and a passionate conviction to kill all drug users up to the last one of them, the Church has found in Duterte a different kind of political drama. With a high approval rating and a highly effective social media machinery, bishops and priests have difficulty engaging Duterte. The president's use of ad hominem attacks that can really discredit the

⁵⁰ See Eric Marcelo Genilo, S.J., "Epilogue: The Church of PCP II after the RH Bill Debate," Eric Marcelo Genilo, Agnes Brazal, and Daniel Franklin Pilario, eds., *The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines: Quo Vadis?* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2015), 169-189.

credibility of any opponent has pushed back the Church to the margins. Unfortunately, the marginalized bishops and priests are not getting support from their marginalized flock. The hierarchy and the clergy have not also succeeded in putting up a united front against Duterte. Not even the bishops who used to be vocal against government issues could put up a strong criticism against the issues of alleged human rights violations of the current administration. Despite the marginalization of the poor under Duterte, the Church's statements are crafted to sound safe, balanced, and calibrated. Forced to go back to its sacristy, the Church especially the bishops have become focused on internal ecclesiastical affairs. Precisely why it is not surprising to hear preparations for the quincentennial of Christianity's arrival in the Philippines mainly and essentially in religious and liturgical terms.

The predicament of the poor during the COVID-19 pandemic synthesized the so many gaps and deficiencies of Philippine society. We can enumerate at least seven areas where the Philippine government has failed its people: (1) healthcare system and health facilities, (2) poverty and urbanization, (3) assistance to people with physical and mental disabilities and the ageing, (4) mass public transport system not just in the capital region but also in the other major or developing urban centers in the country, (5) food security and agriculture, (6) family planning and population management, and (7) decentralized governance (grounded in the principle of subsidiarity).

Apparently, the abovementioned agenda have been largely disregarded by the Philippine government. The pandemic has shown that Philippine democracy more concretely in the aspect of social and economic rights remains largely wanting. This is not to say that efforts were not made in order to help people move forward and

survive amidst a serious threat. Indeed, it is fair to say that there were efforts and to some extent such did help people cross the threshold of difficulty in the current situation. However, the experiences of people presented above using the gestalt of the political face of poverty goes to show that many of the programs and projects across administrations lack continuity and coherence. Such a failure is not only a matter of political ineffectiveness or inefficiency but also of ethical bankruptcy.

The exploitative conditions that have been sustained through the years were clearly highlighted by the people's poverty and their vulnerability to the very system that is supposed to defend them during COVID-19. They have become objects of humiliation and (human rights) violations, and although they were given assistance but such was also not without any color of political opportunism. It is unthinkable how a country that professes, through its constitution, to "promote a just and humane society and promote the common good under the rule of law and the regime of truth and freedom," among other values, continues to live in a widening economic divide.

After decades of elections the concept and practice of representation have been proven to be a failure in facilitating people's movement out from their unfreedoms. This is concrete in leaders who are popular but who have not optimized the powers and opportunities of representation in order to maximize the country's political resources and thereby create tangible benefits to people: basic services in the form of healthcare, housing, public transportation and food. Representation has been used to further perpetuate the same set of representatives. And as the system continues in all its outdated fashion poor Filipinos are continually caught in various forms of unfreedoms and thus deprived of so many capabilities and opportunities. They have remained low

in financial literacy, lacking in support systems and other economic safety nets. Precisely why in a time of pandemic they cannot but panic due to a perceived difficulty in life that would practically push them to greater vulnerabilities.

But the whole situation is not just a political and economic concern. It is also one that should deeply concern the Church. Vatican II after all has clearly said that the people's grief and anxieties are also that of the Church. A COP should not only say enough on these issues, it has to understand well enough the reality of poverty in the Philippines.

Toward a Renewed Preferential Option for the Poor by a Church in the New Normal

Much has been said about society's changes in the so-called new normal but what awaits the Church in a world that has suffered a lot and will perhaps continue to because of COVID-19? In a society that is increasingly secular, the Church, and here we specifically speak of its leadership, has a calling to renew in a radical way its preferential option for the poor. Already in 1967, Pope Paul VI emphasized the Church's deep interest in and concern for the progressive development of peoples particularly in "the case of those peoples who are trying to escape the ravages of hunger, poverty, endemic disease and ignorance; of those who are seeking a larger share in the benefits of civilization and a more active improvement of their human qualities; of those who are consciously striving for fuller growth."⁵¹

A renewed preferential option for the poor by the Philippine Church coincides and gives fuller meaning to the commemoration of the quincentennial anniversary of

⁵¹ *Populorum Progressio*, 1

Christian presence in the country. Such an event is auspicious for the Church to exercise its prophetic and pastoral role by engaging politics through rational discourse, and that by purifying the State especially in areas where it has failed to live up to promote justice being the intrinsic criterion of all political life, it would revitalize its very communion with the world whose joys, grief, and anxieties are also its own.

The COVID-19 pandemic may be viewed in various ways through various lenses. One may read things mainly from the perspective of charity, that is, the catastrophic event was a moment to help one's neighbors through whatever initiative such as donations, fund drives, and outreach activities among others. These are undeniably essential and even integral to the collective calling to walk with one another in the spirit of fraternity. However, one may also read, and still from a Christian perspective, the situation as a moment of prophetic dialogue with the world especially with those who are in power to whom the achievement of justice in the sphere of politics is both a responsibility and a vocation. This means that, learning from the situation, the Church especially its leadership, must not miss out reading the signs of the times of the whole situation, being attentive to the cries of the poor who have been victims of social injustice, and whose poverty have become more intense under conditions of limited mobility and limited access to life's basic necessities.

Under the new normal, it is imperative for a COP to review and reflect its commitment to the poor keeping in mind with humility that though the Church is a teacher it has a lot to learn from society and the world because the truth that comes from God continues to gradually unfold in the landscape of human experience. If we may appropriate to the Church what one moral theologian says of Christian ethics, if the Church is an instrument

for the methodic search for the humanizing will of God then the routine extinction or degradation of human life through the absence or denial of basic needs like food, water, and shelter cannot but be the primary content or subject matter, as the gospel itself is witness.⁵²

Within the framework of Amartya Sen's perspective, the advocacy to help the poor not excluding lobbying for reforms that should benefit the poor, should focus on increasing people's capabilities and chances of wellbeing. In a post-pandemic scenario, efforts to help the poor no matter how well publicized cannot be supported until and unless they would lead to structural changes that would guarantee a systematized protection of the poor in many aspects of welfare services should it be the case that another wave of pandemic strikes. Learning from what happened to the Filipino nation, a Church of the poor in a new normal has to be more assertive in heightening people's consciences and efforts to demand the government to recognize the ethical imperatives of governance.

Apparently, the agenda abovementioned are difficult to put forward under the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte. But a Church of the poor cannot just enjoy living within the confines of its conveniences. We have seen how much the poor have suffered in a time of pandemic not really because the virus is fatal but because as a society we remain unprepared to handle worse situations given the vulnerabilities of people due to the experience of multidimensional unfreedoms: poor infrastructure, limitations in mobility, lack of savings, vulnerability to abuse, powerlessness and lack of bargaining capacity and the pre-existence of various health-related concerns among many others.

⁵² Miranda, *What Will You Have Me Do for You?*, 177.

He who wages to prefer the poor must constantly struggle against all forms of obstacle to feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, and defending the oppressed among others and this even includes unceasingly struggling against the fear of losing one's riches, comfort, benefactors and political allies as a consequence of siding with those who are abused, marginalized, forgotten, and least favored in society.⁵³

⁵³ Abellanos, *Discursive Detours and Weak Gatekeeping*, 245.

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