

## UNDERSTANDING THE EFFECTS OF PANDEMIC ON CHURCH SERVICES AND RELIGIOSITY: A RESEARCH-BASED INQUIRY

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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative study that used interview in gathering data was aimed to find out the effects of COVID-19 on the religious services offered by the parish amidst the pandemic and their impact on the religiosity of parishioners. Results showed that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected both the parishes and the parishioners. The offered religious services of the parishes decreased and this also has an impact on the parishioners' religiosity. Moreover, it covered how the Church has responded to address this issue. Technology was found useful; however, challenges also arose considering their capacity to provide the service and the internet connectivity issues in the country. Despite several challenges on both the church and the people's religiosity, there were identified positive effects of the pandemic on the parishioners. They became closer to God and became more sensitive to their needs and the people around them.

**Keywords:** church services, pandemic, religiosity

## INTRODUCTION

It is evident that the world is gradually coping with the pandemic, as many countries are now relaxing their policies and health protocols. But will the world be able to go back to its normal phase? Many are saying, we are bound to accept the new normal. But in accepting it, it is relative that we understand the pandemic and its effect, for us to move forward.

Many studies have been covered on education and health relative to the pandemic, but only a few are focused on the religious services and the religiosity of people. Were they not affected? How far was the Church, its services, and its believers were affected by this worldwide pandemic?

Actions had been taken by different countries to address the pandemic and prevent its spread. In the Philippines, the Department of Health (DOH) activated the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) for the management of emerging infectious diseases through DOH Resolution No. 01, Series 2020 (DOH, 2020). This was based on Executive Order No. 168, which approved its creation on May 26, 2014 (LawPhil, 2021). This resulted to series of other issuances coming from national and local that restricted gatherings. Among them is Executive Order No. 36 S2021 from the Office of the Governor of Zambales. This limited the gatherings, including church services, such as necrological services, wakes, inurnments, and funerals with a 50% indoor venue capacity and 70% outdoor venue capacity were allowed for in-person religious gatherings.

Additionally, the IATF released the Omnibus guidelines on the implementation of community quarantine in the Philippines, which is amended from time to time. But up to its latest issuance, mass gatherings, including religious activities, have been limited (IATF, 2020; IATF, 2021). Even this 2021 Holy Week gathering has been banned entirely in Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) areas (CBCP News, 2021). This restriction on religious gathering brought to life online Masses. But this was not easy. In fact, Pope Francis himself warns of the danger in online Masses. According to him, the believer's relationship with Jesus is "intimate and personal, but it is in a community and this closeness to Christ without community, without the Eucharist, without the people of God assembled together and without the sacraments is dangerous" (Catholic News Service, 2020).

Indeed, going to church and attending the Mass have always been a huge part of the Filipinos' life. The Eucharist is the center of every Catholic's spiritual life. Thus, this public health crisis has brought challenges, not only to the Church, but to its faithful believers.

According to Bishop Pabillo, the online Mass is a poor substitute for the physical attending of the Mass in churches. Through the Holy Mass, the church commemorates the Holy Eucharist, including the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Catholics believe that Jesus Christ is truly made present through the bread and wine that represents His body and blood (ABS-CBN News, 2021).

In a survey conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), it was determined that out of the 2,214 Catholics between the ages of 18-35 respondents, only 25% said that they have participated in the online Mass during the pandemic. Twenty-two percent (22%) said they watched a little and 54% said they had not watched at all (Gray, 2020).

Moreover, the pandemic has affected the religious lifestyles and practices of Catholics and posed a challenge on how to enact religion amid the lockdown and physical distancing. As digital religion has been examined widely in recent years, it was a chance to further explore religion and its practices in the time of a pandemic (Huygens, 2021). Thus, it was a time for the Churches to adapt to technology and make use of Facebook Live, YouTube, Zoom, and other platforms (Gjelten, 2020) in providing online religious services. According to Campbell and Evolvi (2019), digital religion is a framework for the articulation of the evolution of religious practices online. More specifically, it is the adaptation of traditional religious practices to digital environments.

True enough, it is not only the Mass that was affected by this pandemic, but also other religious activities. For example, having a funeral to honor a deceased loved, one is an opportunity to celebrate the life of those who passed and grieve unquestionably. But with the pandemic, the wake and even the final blessing inside the church has limited its attendees to almost only the family. What is worse is that COVID-19 deaths are required to be cremated. (National Funeral Directors Association, 2022).

Marriages are also affected by the health crisis. According to the American Family Survey, the rate of couples seeking church weddings is falling. Additionally, the enactment of the Act of Contrition

is also affected (Wilcox, 2020). The Act of Contrition remits people's venial sins and gives forgiveness to mortal sins. Yet, despite the efforts of the priests from all around the world to continue offering confessions during the pandemic, the lockdowns and stay-at-home orders are making it difficult for the Catholics to seek God's forgiveness in the confessional (McKeown, 2020). In a similar situation is the Last Rites, which is specifically catered for the gravely ill and dying individuals. Due to the newly imposed strict rules to ensure the safety of the people, priests are having a hard time doing this (Macaraan, 2021).

Consequently, if there are contradicting views on how religious practices are offered by the Church due to the pandemic, what happens to the people's religiosity?

According to Pace (2014), there are two dimensions of religiosity: Intrinsic and Extrinsic. Intrinsic religiosity is described as a core value of the self, while extrinsic religiosity can be a source of social connection and people's personal benefit.

There are standard measures for measuring religiosity such as religious affiliation, frequency of religious service attendance, frequency of prayer, and belief in God (Pearce, Hayward, and Pearlman, 2017).

Stolz (2009) defined religiosity as the "individual's preferences, emotions, beliefs, and actions that refer to an existing (or self-made) religion". According to him, if an individual prays, sacrifices, believes, loves, or fears his god –then this is 'religiosity'.

But more than these definitions, the question is, with the limitation brought by the pandemic in the practice of faith of Catholics and the shift to online, has their religiosity improved or declined?

Additionally, is the use of technology an effective response to evangelization?

With the continuous advancement of technology, a generation of people relying on that technology and the internet rose. And with the onset of the health crisis, technology has become more useful. According to *Communio et Progressio*, the new and modern media is offering new ways of showing the people the message of the Gospel (Pontifical Council Documents, 1971). In fact, one can find Catholic Online Masses in the web. Online Mass becomes the alternative to going to the church every Sunday.

Yet, as technology aided the Catholic Church in the transition to a new schedule of online live streamed Masses, there are still those who struggled to adjust to this new normal. Catholics who are used to the physical participation in the Mass – from the actual kneeling to the receiving of the body of Christ to the process of evangelization – faced an abrupt change (White, 2020). According to the Pontifical Council of Social Communications, a virtual Mass does not constitute the fulfilment of celebrating the Eucharist. It cannot provide the needed presence of Christ in the bread and wine (Labenek, 2014). As explained by Church Historian Faggioli, the Catholic Theology of Liturgy says that the people celebrate with the priest, and if the people are not there, then it is a Mass that is lacking something (White, 2020).

According to Gecewicz (2020), 90% of regular churchgoers in the United States said that their churches had to close their doors in order to combat the spread of the virus, and that is why there was a vast majority of worship services moved online. Churches made use of platforms such as Zoom to do different worship services, one of which is Bible study sessions (Pew Research Center, 2020). Yet, there are those who still prefer to attend religious services face-to-face. According to a survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), around one-third of people who used to attend church regularly do not watch online services. This is because the people still preferred attending face-to-face rather than the online version of worship (PRRI, 2020).

Given all these, was the religiosity of believers been affected by the pandemic?

In a survey conducted by Pew Research Center, it was found that around 24% of adults in the United States said that their faith has become stronger because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Two percent said that their faith became weaker, and 47% stated that their faith has not changed (Gecewicz, 2020).

It is for this reason that this present study was conducted. It intended to document the number, quality, and changes of religious services offered by two parishes located in Zambales during this pandemic, as well as the pandemic's effect on the religiosity of the parish members. It is hoped that through the findings of this research, a greater understanding of how the pandemic has changed people's

lives and their faith is established, which is anticipated to assist the Church in becoming more responsive to the needs of its people.

### Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This part discusses three theories that serve as backbone of this research namely Uses and Gratifications Theory, Media Ecology Theory, and Functionalism.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory, originally introduced by Elihu Katz in the early 1970s, focuses on the audience's free will and determines that media can be used in different ways and for different purposes. There are basic assumptions relative to this theory. First, the viewers are goal-oriented, and they attempt to achieve their goals through the media source. Second, it is the audience's initiative to decide what media to use in connection with the gratification of their need. Next is that the media competes with other sources to satisfy needs. This can help an individual cope with the circumstances surrounding them. The fourth one is that many of the goals set by the media are derived from the data supplied by the individual audience. (Vinney, 2019).

The Media Ecology Theory, authored by Marshall McLuhan, has the goal to understand how prevalent the uses of all types of media are in people's lives. Media ecology looks into how media of communication affect human perception, understanding, feeling, and value. It also studies how one's interaction with media facilitates or hinders his/her chances of survival (Sintelly, 2020).

Functionalism, founded by Emile Durkheim, is one of the three sociological theories of religion. In this theory, Durkheim argues that religion does not only concern belief, but it also includes the regular rituals and ceremonies that the believers do. In this theory, Durkheim emphasizes the functions that religion serves the society. The first function is that *religion gives meaning and purpose to life*. Secondly, *religion reinforces social unity and stability*. Third, religion is an *agent of social control and thus strengthens social order*. The fourth function of religion is *greater physical and psychological well-being*. The final function of religion is that *it motivates people to work for positive social change*. (University of Minnesota, n.d.)

Over-all, there are different sources of information and services in the media, and it is available to everyone. With that, media users decide what they want to see and absorb from the media contents based on what they think can gratify their needs. More so, people have various reasons or goals for using and choosing any communication media. When people watch from a specific media source, this tends to influence them. These effects can be enhanced by how religion has affected the life of the individual - that practicing one's religion through attendance to church services gives more meaning and purpose to people's lives; could reinforce social unity and stability and can also help in promoting good physical and psychological well-being. And the more involved the audience is, the greater is the effect.

As applied to the present study, it can be inferred that churches have adapted to the new normal, wherein their services have been decreased, limited, or provided alternatives like the use of online technology, a change attributed to the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

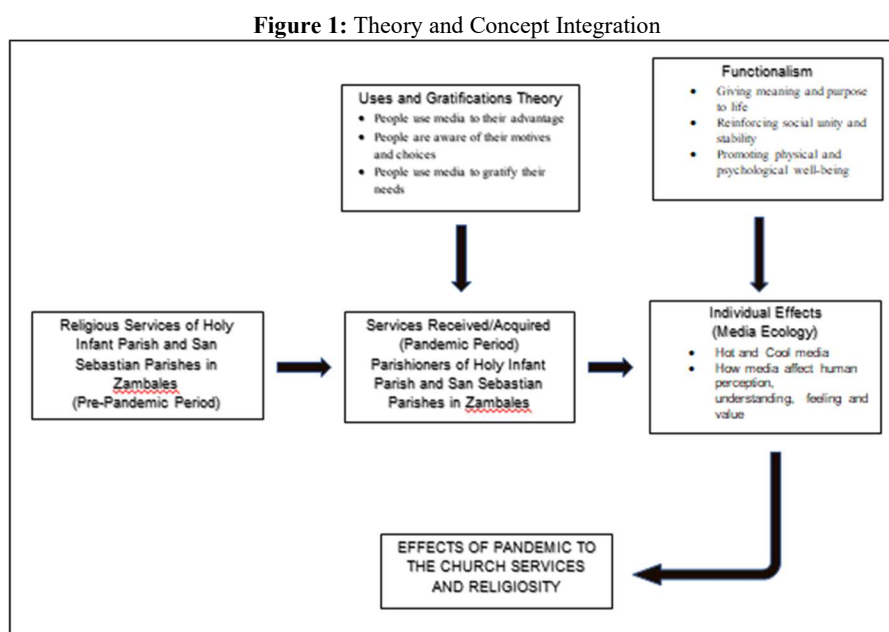
Relative to the changes in the churches, the services being received or sought for by the parishioners may have also changed, in terms of the number and quality. And the results differ from one parishioner to the other. There are different reasons why each acquires a certain church service. These reasons could be based on the different needs and challenges posed by the pandemic in their lives.

Since there are different reasons for practicing their faith during this pandemic, and the number of services attended to become restrained, this study focused on finding out the individual effects on the parishioners relative to their religiosity. This includes intrinsic (self-value) and extrinsic (social connection), as well as frequency of religious service attendance, frequency of prayer, and belief in God.

As people practice their religion, they tend to attend different church services too. As such, this study also gathered information from the parishioners on how much does attending church services have helped improve their religiosity, as well as the challenges they faced.

Finally, the researcher was able to determine ways on how the needs and challenges of parishes and selected parishioners have been addressed amidst the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 1 summarizes the integration of the theoretical with the conceptual framework of the study.



### Central Question and Sub-questions

**Central Question:** What are the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the religious services of parishes and on the parishioners' religiosity of San Sebastian and Holy Infant Parishes in Zambales?

### Sub-questions

1. How much has COVID-19 pandemic affected the religious services offered in San Sebastian and Holy Infant parishes in terms of number and quality of religious services, and the changes or adaptations to the use of technology?
2. What are the parishioners' reasons in attending religious services?
3. How much has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the religiosity of the parishioners?
4. What are the needs and challenges faced by parishes and parishioners on religious services and religiosity?
5. How did the parish and parishioners respond to the identified effects and challenges brought by the pandemic?
- 6.

## METHOD

### Research Design

The purpose of this study is to determine the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on both the religious services of the parishes and the parishioners' religiosity. Thus, the qualitative research approach was employed. Being qualitative, this research made use of case study as it focuses on how the case, which is the "pandemic", has affected the church services and the religiosity of people. Relatively, a guide interview was used to gather the required data necessary to understand the effect of the phenomenon to the respondents.

### Respondents of the Study

The researcher used purposive sampling for both sets of interviewees. The total number of participants is fourteen (14). It consisted of 10 parishioners with five (5) coming from Holy Infant Parish and five (5) from San Sebastian Parish, one (1) parish priest, two (2) church workers, and one (1) active member of church organization.

The following were the criteria for the parishioner-respondents: 18 years old and above, attending either Holy Infant Parish or San Sebastian Parish, and are Catholics. Table 1 shows their profile.

**Table 1.** Demographic Profile of Parishioner-Participants

AGE	FREQUENCY
73	1
65	1
54	1
45	2
42	1
41	1
27	1
26	1
22	1
CHURCH AFFILIATION	FREQUENCY
Holy Infant Parish	5
San Sebastian Parish	5
JOB DESCRIPTION	FREQUENCY
Former Values Teacher	1
College Student	1
Barangay Kagawad	1
Lay Minister	1
Retiree	1
Data Privacy Officer	1
Clerk	2
Information Technology Staff	1
Statistician	1
PARTICIPATION IN THE CHURCH (Note: Multiple answers allowed)	FREQUENCY
Churchgoers	6
Lay Minister	1
Choir Member	1
Choir Pianist	1
Knights of Columbus	3

As with the parish side, the following were the qualifying criteria for these interviewees: they should be the priest or an active member of the Parish organization and working in the church's office (e.g. Parish secretary or catechist). Table 2 provides their profile.

**Table 2.** Demographic Profile of Parish-Participants

AGE	FREQUENCY
57	1
49	1
43	1
38	1
PARTICIPATION IN THE CHURCH	FREQUENCY
Priest	1
Church Worker	2
Active Member of an Organization	1

### Instrumentation

The researcher used guide questions for the in-depth interview, which was open-ended for the most part to allow free expression of ideas and let the interviewee answer and give additional

information and examples. Also, there were two sets of guide questions – one for the parishioners, and another for the priest or active member of the Parish organization and church worker.

### **Validation of the Instrument**

To validate the two in-depth interview guides, the researcher conducted a pre-test in another parish within Zambales – one priest and two parishioners.

Specifically, the pre-test participants were the two parishioner-interviewees from St. Augustine Parish in Iba, Zambales. Meanwhile, the priest-interviewee was the parish priest from St. James Parish in Subic, Zambales. After they answered, they were asked if there are unclear questions, as well as possible improvements to the guide questions. Also, the researcher reviewed the answers for completeness and correctness of data gathered based on the set objectives. Based on these comments, the guide interviews were revised for both the parishioners and the priest.

### **Data Gathering and Analysis**

The researcher gave letters to interview parishioners that attended San Sebastian Parish and Holy Infant Parish. Schedules were settled, and the interview was performed with utmost consideration of health protocols. Data cleaning was performed after the recorded interviews were transcribed.

Results were analyzed and presented in textual presentations with thematic grouping focused on the research questions.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Effects of the Pandemic on the Religious Services of the Parish**

The Church before the pandemic offered different religious services to its parishioners, as follows: Baptism, Barrio Mass, Holy Eucharist, Anointing of the Sick, Confession, First Communion, Confirmation, Wedding, Procession, Holy Week activities, and others. But with the COVID-19 taking over, was there a change?

An interview with the parish priest or the officer of a church organization and the parish worker/catechist revealed the effect of the COVID-19 to the services they offered in terms of number, quality, and adaptations to technology.

Accordingly, both parishes offered online mass and the Holy Eucharist. Despite the pandemic, Holy Infant Parish (HIP) provided baptism while the San Sebastian Parish (SSP) delivered barrio mass and anointing of the sick, but these were only offered after the lockdown was lifted and with strict observance of health protocols.

According to HIP1 and HIP2, Online Mass and the Holy Eucharist are offered in the Holy Infant Parish while the San Sebastian Parish interviewees mentioned Mass and limited Barrio Masses.

Based on the interview with HIP1 and HIP2, confession, first communion, confirmation, wedding, processions and Holy Week activities were the religious services and activities that Holy Infant Parish had to forego during the pandemic.

On the other hand, the SSP1 and SSP2 interviewees from San Sebastian Parish mentioned that their parish did not offer the Holy Communion to children, Confirmation, and Processions. Also, they said that “Salubong” during Holy Week and other Holy Week activities have not been done in the past two years of the pandemic. Accordingly, the anointing of the sick was done when it is non-COVID related to aid the needy but without violating the health protocols.

According to Catholic Online (n.d.), the services of the Catholic Church are centered on its sacraments such as Baptism, Holy Eucharist, Confirmation, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony. Based on the findings, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, only 3 out of the 7 sacraments were offered by Holy Infant and San Sebastian Parishes, namely Baptism, Holy Eucharist, and Anointing of the Sick. It was only when the COVID-19 pandemic situation improved that the Sacrament of Matrimony was offered again. In addition, as the pandemic pushed the Catholic

Church to change in terms of their delivery of the religious services that they are offering, Online Masses were offered in both parishes as alternatives.

Referring to **the quality of their offered services**, one interviewee exclaimed that there is something missing with online religious services. Also, another interviewee mentioned that the parishioners are not receiving the actual communion, and with the decrease of church attendees, from 30-40%, the social interaction has also been affected. Also, HIP2 mentioned the impact of the pandemic to the elderly.

Moreover, the **parishes adapted to the changes brought by the pandemic, and both made use of technology to continue offering some of their religious services**. The Holy Infant Parish made use of online technology for Masses, seminars, as well as meetings of priests and church organizations. Interviewees from San Sebastian also mentioned the offering of virtual and live streaming of their mass.

According to Pew Research Center (2021), technology has been a lifeline for some during the coronavirus pandemic. People used technology to communicate with their relatives and made use of it in new and different ways. In their survey, people's use of the internet has changed, including their views about how helpful technology has been for them and the struggles that some have faced. Accordingly, two-thirds of these digital interactions have been useful, but it is not enough as a replacement for in-person contact. Similar to the results of this present study, there is an increase in the followers and viewers of the online Mass and other online religious services, however, to some parishioners, it is still not better than the actual physical attendance to these religious services.

When asked if there were changes as the situation is becoming better, both parishes answered that the protocols have not changed much. Therefore, they must follow. In fact, one interviewee even mentioned that police sometimes come to them to check if they are following the protocols that were set. But one good thing when the protocols somehow eased out, the number of churchgoers and meeting attendees increased.

Moreover, SSP2 mentioned that their church organization is now having face-to-face meetings, as well as an increase in the people's social relationships. Additionally, the interviewee mentioned that this time after Mass instead of immediately going home, they stay to check how everyone is doing. This means that the social relationships became better, one positive change brought by the pandemic.

As Solatan (2013) wrote in his thesis, Pope Paul II views the internet as a valuable tool for evangelization and communication. He said that it can provide information and stir interest in individuals. However, although virtual masses help evangelize people, and that it is a practical and acceptable way to support its believers, face-to-face or personal witness experiences with the church and its community can never be outdone.

### **Parishioners' Reasons in Attending Church Services**

Given the limited church services provided, ten (10) parishioners, five from Holy Infant Parish (P1 to P5) and five from San Sebastian Parish (P6 to P10) were interviewed what among the provided church services did they attend to during the pandemic.

P1, P2 and P10 said that they only attended the online Mass offered by their parish. P3 attended the limited face-to-face Mass once, as well as baptism and motorcade procession when the protocols have somewhat eased out. P4 only attended the limited face-to-face Masses and baptism. P5 said that he attended their parish's online Mass, limited face-to-face Masses, a baptism, a wedding, and a funeral. Moreover, P6 had attended the limited face-to-face Masses offered by their parish, a baptism, novena and procession. Similarly, P7 had attended the online Mass, limited face-to-face Masses, baptism and novena. P8 also said that he has attended the online Mass, limited face-to-face Masses, motorcade procession, and novena offered by their parish. And lastly, P9 said that she has attended the limited face-to-face, a baptism and a wedding.

Among the interviewees, P3, P4, P6, and P9 attend the limited face-to-face mass. P1, P2 and P10 only attend the online mass. P5, P7 and P8 attend either the online or the limited face-to-face mass. Over-all, seven of the interviewees attend the limited-face-to-face mass while six attend the online mass.

When asked why they continued to participate in the church services despite the pandemic, they provided several reasons.



P1, P8, and P10 said that it is their Christian Catholic responsibility and obligation. P2 said that she attended the religious services to pray for everyone's safety. P3 and P4 said that it is their vow or "panata". P5 stated that *"It's part of culture and part of my formation; I was formed to be attending services"*. Interviewees P6, P8, and P9 said that this has been the nature of their family and their tradition. Lastly, P10 said that *"...the faith, that is one of the reasons and besides faith, I sometimes don't know if it became a routine or obligation, but I prefer to believe it is faith"*.

Moreover, all the interviewees said that they have identified their purpose in life through their attendance at church services, and that participating in the church services allowed them to increase and strengthen their faith; it made them realize that by praying and talking to the almighty helps in times of need; and that they feel closer to God.

Additionally, their social relationships have been improved through their attendance in church services. In fact, they have mentioned that they are able to communicate more with the family and friends; able to socialize and bond with co-members of church organization; socialize with online mass attendees; and able to participate in the conduct of activities with Knights of Columbus.

Aside from that, this participation to church services during the pandemic also improved their physical and psychological health. They have gained spiritual strength, able to do anger management, considered safety, became more open-minded, became mindful of the food intake, and were able to recognize that prayer directed them towards their destiny.

One of Dunbar's (2020) main findings in his study is that attendance at these religious activities has a positive influence on the sense of engagement in one's local community, as well as the bondedness to the other members of one's congregation.

Also, Boguszewski, Makowska, Bozewicz, and Podkowinska (2020) found out that due to people's attendance in their religious commitments, they tend to have better physical and psychological health; they tend to live longer than those who are not religious; they find comfort during difficult times; and their social interactions with others improve as they go to worship. In addition, people who are religious tend to be happier and more satisfied with their lives, as well as being less likely to be depressed.

Soukup (2020) wrote the benefits of attending church services, to include: church connects people socially, helps them find the lesson in their trials, find deeper meaning in their lives, and allowed closer relationship with God. Although these were meant for physical visit to the church, it cannot be denied that even in online attendance, these were supported as the parishioners found more meaning in their lives during the pandemic; socialization with family, friends, and co-church members was bred; and triggered closer relationship with God. This pandemic allowed them to have a new perspective – that during dark times, there can still be good things that come out of it.

### **The Effect of Pandemic to the Parishioners' Religiosity**

Most of the interviewed parishioners admitted that their religiosity was affected during the pandemic. According to P2, *"My praying became less, I attend Mass through online but still limited, I didn't abandon it per se, more like not just like being inactive"*. Only P3 and P4 said that their religiosity was not affected. According to P4, *"No, it is not affected because I get to practice it every Sunday"*.

When probed on the effect, they have several explanations. P1 said that she cannot attend the church services personally and has been praying more. On the other hand, P2 said that her praying became less. P3 previously said that his religiosity was not affected. P4 said that he has been praying more. P5 said that there was a tendency to reflect on his situations. P6 and P8 also said that they have been praying more. In addition, P8 said that he has helped those in need. P7 and P9 said that they had limited interactions. Lastly, P10 mentioned that it is much more convenient now, so she prays with her family every day at 6 o'clock in the evening.

The responses show that there were two effects of the pandemic, it either weakened their religiosity or strengthened it. Weakened because they cannot attend the church services physically and personally; they prayed less; limited interactions. On the other hand, some mentioned that they prayed more; they reflected on their situations; they helped those in need; and mentioned that attending to mass became more convenient.

But it is good to note that when asked if their religiosity helped them in facing the pandemic, all interviewees agreed. There were two reasons provided: their religiosity motivated them to pray, and it gave them hope.

Dunbar (2020) stated that religiosity and attendance at religious services have a strong effect on engagement and level of trust. His study strongly suggested that active participation in the religious services offered at one's local church is important. Religiosity plays a role in creating greater commitment. In the case of this study, it is their religiosity that allowed them to have hope in the face of the pandemic.

The parish-interviewees were also asked on **their observation in terms of the religiosity of their parishioners during the pandemic.**

HIP1 stated during the interview that, "...organizations have no meetings, no activities, although they still attend the Mass but with lesser attendance". And when asked if anyone approached the church asking for spiritual assistance, he answered, "there are still people who come here, for example, during confession, there are those who ask for advice".

Meanwhile, SSP1 said that he was not in the position to say anything about it. SSP2, on the other hand, said that the people are still religious because they are attending even if there is a pandemic. Accordingly, there is an increase in attendance now that things are getting better - from 40-60% improvement on attendance.

#### **Needs and Challenges faced by the Parish and the Parishioners during the Pandemic**

Different challenges were mentioned by the parishioners. P1, for example, narrated her difficulty to practice her faith due to the limitation in going to church, and the challenge the pandemic brought that hindered her to help others spiritually. Similarly, P7 was not able to attend Masses. P2 focused more on safety issues while P3 narrates the issue on socialization. Further, P4 and P6 were overwhelmed by their fear of the pandemic. Also, P5 said that his challenge was being at home doing nothing. P8 stated that due to the pandemic, there were no regular practices or rehearsals of the parish choir especially that two of their members got positive of COVID-19. Moreover, P9 said that her challenge was that a family member had COVID while P10 said that a family member got sick, with no mention if COVID-19 related or not.

Likewise, although online church services were offered, there were challenges too. P1 mentioned that sometimes live-streamed services were cut off, which was also supported by the statements of P2, P6 and P7 by mentioning their experiences on slow internet connections. P9 also experienced being cut off as her internet load was consumed before the online mass was over. Also, he mentioned that it is not only on his part but also the internet connection of the Church. The same has been mentioned by P10. Contrary to that, P4 was not affected as he did not attend online services.

Lastly, the parishioner-interviewees mentioned that some of their need for church services was not addressed during the pandemic. Specifically, P2 and P7 were not able to participate in procession; P6 and P10 were not able to go to confession; and P4 was not able to serve by giving communion. These were spiritual needs that they hoped to be addressed. Unfortunately, it was impossible during the height of the pandemic due to the lockdown.

Indeed, religious activities such as funerals (NFDA, n.d.), marriages, acts of contrition, and others were affected by this pandemic (Wilcox, 2020). In the case of this study, the confession and communion were deemed very important by parishioners, but they were made unavailable because of the pandemic.

On the part of the parish, there were also challenges. When asked on how it affected the operations of the parish during the pandemic, the parish-interviewees admitted that there were financial issues that affected their church workers. HIP2 stated during the interview that, "...the workers here are given allowances for their transportation, that's why when the pandemic hit, the effect was big because that assistance was gone". SSP1 also mentioned "We reached the point wherein the staff had to sacrifice to continuously support the Parish"

On the contrary, SSP2 stated, "I don't see them affected by the pandemic...the church activities are still going on, donations are still going on, the pledges...the renovation of our Parish Hall still continuous, continuous improvement of everything".

#### **Response to the Effect and Challenges of the Pandemic**

On the part of the parishioners, they have several responses to the effect and challenges they faced. It is good to note that most of the responses were positive in nature. For example, P1 became more generous in terms of helping other people financially, medically, and in all aspects of life. She also gave assistance to the church pantry and has prayed a lot more, specifically the Rosary. P5 said that he was able to cope with the challenges because there was more time for reflection and meditation. P6 said that she coped by sharing her experiences and talking with her peers. Moreover, P7 said that he prayed to cope. While P10 combined prayer and communication to relatives helped her survive. Also, P10 made mention of the routinary six o'clock in the evening rosary.

As with the issue on internet connectivity, the parishioners resorted to watching the "replay" in YouTube of the church services that were cut off or missed. With the issue on missed processions, P8 watched live videos whenever possible, and when the motorcade processions were resorted on by the parish, P6 attended.

Over-all, it is noted that the participants of this study responded positively despite the trials they underwent because of the pandemic. It did not pull them apart, instead, it made them stronger.

DeRossett, LaVoie, and Brooks (2021) discussed the two types of religious coping wherein positive religious coping is linked to better physical and mental health outcomes, while negative religious coping is associated with an increase in anxiety and stress of an individual. In this study, the parishioners coped by becoming more generous to other people, communicating with relatives and peers, and praying the Rosary. Some also reflected and meditated on their life and experiences. Evidently, none of the parishioner-participants experienced serious negative effects on their religiosity and none used any negative religious coping mechanism.

On the part of the parish-interviewees, they were asked how they assisted their parishioners in terms of their emotional and spiritual needs during the pandemic.

HIP1 and HIP2 interviewees said that the Holy Infant Parish gave advice to the people. Moreover, one said "*...through social media, we use this as a tool to share simple Bible verses to our parishioners*".

The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP News, 2012) stated that the Church is asked to explore and discover new ways and means of sharing the good news more effectively to the people, and this should be done always with the guidance of the spirit. The two parishes in this study made use of the internet to reach out to their parishioners.

Delos Reyes (2014) found that the two parishes in her study used different types of strategies to persuade people to join their pastoral ministry and for evangelization. In addition, she discovered in her study that both parishes have welcomed and embraced how technology can help them encourage people to join their pastoral ministry and help in promoting evangelization. Likewise, this study shows that both Holy Infant Parish and San Sebastian Parishes made use of online technology and social media like Facebook to encourage the youth and their parishioners to stay strong and to promote hope to assist their emotional and spiritual needs amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Also, SSP1 stated that they promoted hope in their parish. Additionally, SSP2 said that the church has been actively giving activities that help the emotional and spiritual needs of the people. HIP2 mentioned that the catechists helped the frontliners by providing food for them to know that the church is there for them. He also mentioned that there were sponsors who were willing to help the church in these endeavors.

Finally, the parishioners were asked on what they can recommend for others to strengthen their religiosity and cope with the pandemic, the following were mentioned: to think positive, to watch videos related to faith or watch online Mass, read the Bible, play religious songs, and watch documentaries about faith. Moreover, they also mentioned that it would help to volunteer, encourage other people, be generous, and continue supporting their parish. This way, the church and the people will survive the pandemic together.

**Conclusions**

Based on the results from the in-depth interviews, it is inferred that the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly affected both the parishes and the parishioners. The offered religious services of the parishes decreased and this also has an impact on the parishioners' religiosity.

In addition, the positive effects on the parishioners' religiosity weigh higher than the negative ones as they were able to pray more, been closer to God, have better relationships with their families and friends, and their physical and psychological well-being has improved. Also, despite the changes brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic to both the parishes and the parishioners, the parish continued to offer religious services and came up with alternative ways to continuously serve the people, while the parishioners' faith stood strong amidst the onslaught of the pandemic.

**Implications**

This study gives insights on how the people can use media to satisfy their religious and spiritual needs and use it to their advantage to cope with the current situation.

Also, in this new normal, as the Catholic Church is slowly incorporating the usage of online technology into their service, it is also good if they could also include teaching media literacy to help their parishioners understand how media works and how they can properly act while using it.

In addition, there were some interviewees who still preferred the face-to-face way of attending church services because they feel incomplete when not present in the church. Meanwhile, some also preferred online because they were able to join any religious services at any given time. Hence, every parishioner has different preferences in attending religious services, and both online and face-to-face attendance to these church services has different effects on the religiosity of the parishioners. This must, therefore, be considered by the Church when making decisions in providing church services.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the researcher recommends the following:

1. For the Church to understand how the change in their religious services has affected the religiosity of their parishioners, and to develop new activities that can continuously address the needs and challenges of the parish and their parishioners. The following are few activities that they can do to address their needs and challenges:
  - a. Creation of a YouTube channel wherein videos; short films about faith, hope, and love during the pandemic; events; and media literacy lessons can be posted or streamed at.
  - b. Host Fundraising Events and Auction, wherein the money that will be gathered will help finance their operations and support their staff.
  - c. Livestream other religious services, aside from the online Mass.
  - d. Use hybrid system of providing church services. This way, everyone will be catered.
2. For the parishioners to become more conscious of why they attend religious services and understand how their attendance affects their religiosity and develop new ways to address their needs and challenges. The following are some suggestions:
  - a. Watch faith and hope-related videos and/or animations to help ease the fear of the pandemic.
  - b. Connect with other people and share experiences with them.
3. For the catechists, teachers and professors in related fields such as Christian Living and Religious Studies, to read studies about how religiosity is affected by the religious services, and how the COVID-19 caused a shift in the usage of online technology. Sufficient knowledge about the current and future phenomena and the changes they bring and adaptations made would provide timely and accurate information and lessons.
4. For future researchers to conduct a study on the church services in the new normal and how it affects the religiosity to continuously assist the church in serving its people.

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