Correspondence
The two faces of collateral damage in the Philippines amid COVID-19

To the Editor
In recent publications reacting to Neal’s collateral damage of COVID-19, thoughts on the importance of spirituality were highlighted as one of the salvific factors of men and women of faith. Macaraan’s observation on the development of spiritual practices at home gave rise to the strengthening of the house churches or *Domus Ecclesiae* of every family. It becomes the safest refuge from the threat of SARS-CoV-2 Variant of Concern (VOC) and Variant Under Investigation (VUC) when a healthy and just relationship reigns. Whereas members of the family enduring domestic violence, which is heightened by economic instability, limited movements and transportation, may have been hindered to seek help, report abuse and/or escape their perpetrators. Due to strict and prolonged quarantine orders to stay home, unavailability of online communication channels and information on where and how to report, the victims are placed at greater risk. Those who have been able to reach out for care and protection services must face various challenges such as barangays delaying the release of the Barangay Protection Order, the Philippine National Police (PNP) women’s desk deferring action to post-Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) even in cases of rape, inability to file complaints with persecutor’s office and difficulty of survivors in obtaining medico-legal examination. Filipinos are a family-oriented community and it has brought many beautiful benefits in times of pandemic like the ingenious initiative and proliferation of ‘community pantries’. However, in domestic violence cases, most of the young women members of the family who are vulnerable victims would remain silent or withdrawn because of the ‘hiya’ (shame) to expose an adult abuser in the family.

Despite the increasing numbers of SARS-CoV-2 VOC and VUI infected, the Filipino people seemed to be stubborn in their strong-willed stance of going out doing normal day-to-day activities because of the threatening hunger, lack of food supplies and a spiritual trust in the Divine protection. The religious expression ‘bahala na’, which originated from indigenous word ‘Bathala’ (God, Divine), connotes an attitude of optimistic acceptance or fatalistic resignation in uncertain or difficult moments because there is a Divine being who cares. Driven by negative or positive spiritual and religious coping mechanisms, Filipino’s well-being is deeply rooted in their spiritual life. Leal observed that the religious sector becomes a ‘collateral damage’ of this COVID-19 pandemic since spirituality is always considered wholistic and the physical aspect of a person cannot be set aside nor left behind.

The less fortunate sector of the society is another collateral damage. The pandemonium of the forthcoming political election in the Philippines makes people grieve over the announcement of the lack of funds for the intended ‘ayudas’ (assistance) for the indigent families while some traditional politicians use the pandemic as the platform to make themselves popular assisting the people in the herd immunity, giving food and providing minimum supplies. The ‘utang na loob’ (sense of indebtedness) makes the poor and socially disenfranchised patronize the corrupt candidates. The cost of the beneficence they received put the future of the country at stake.

‘Collateral damage’ in times of pandemic has two faces in the Philippines. The face of goodness and kindness, courage and endurance, the deepening of religious experiences and strengthening of communal spirit. The other face is the horrifying situations that many are trapped into which need critical assessment of cultural values that enslave and dehumanize. We, Filipinos, need a kind of discernment that liberates and makes us healthy in all aspects of life.

Solidarity of humanity, love for each other, camaraderie and best intentions will end the pandemic, but motivations of why one is doing all these must always be questioned a thousand times so that these noble values will be pure as they should be.

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