

Correspondence

COVID-19 and holy orders

In communities with strong religious ties, the church provides an avenue for the dissemination of public health services such as vaccination.¹ During coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), this role and religious services—communion in masses, confessions and especially the training and ordination of ministers for the community they will serve—are made more necessary and their public health practices in ensuring safety in worship can serve as guides to learn from. Although there is no substantial proof of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 transmission from receiving communion through the chalice, there is a theoretical risk, albeit small, via contamination.² This risk is mitigated by the common practice of churches whose mode of giving holy communion is only through the host and not the wine. It was resolved by the church that Christ is fully present in either the bread or wine and that councils have pointed out the preference of not easily giving the wine due to probability of spillage, health concerns, inebriation and ‘absconding with the sacred vessels’.³ It is in the canon law of the church as well that ‘holy communion is to be given under the species of bread alone, or in accordance with the liturgical laws, under both species or, in case of necessity, even under the species of wine alone’ (Can. 925).⁴ Filipino canon lawyers have also pointed that, in the Philippines particularly, which is still predominantly Catholic with 86% of the population being its members, it is also not practical—largely with time and resources—to provide the wine when there is the option of giving only either. The giving of communion ‘under both species’ are permitted, among others, during weddings, first communion, special retreats and the reception of converts. Celebrations where many priests are gathered to share the chalice also include the sacrament of holy orders.

During this COVID-19 pandemic, the imminent possibility of a higher risk of contamination is through the biggest celebrations. This makes ordinations the riskiest religious event where according to Can. 1011§2 ‘the greatest possible number’ in attendance of the faithful is encouraged. Since the lockdown which started in March for the Philippines, some masses and other rites performed by the church have gone virtual and dioceses are putting up extra effort in dispensing the sacraments with social distancing, e.g. car confessions. Seminaries that are the training grounds for ‘future priests

whose shoulders will be laid the task to lead’ into a new world or normal, quite remarkably, gradually adapt to inculcate their integral formation of academic, community and spiritual life through the parishes and online education.⁵

What is noticeable in the religious sector is that even with the pandemic crisis, the number of Catholic ordinations is not significantly reduced. Ordination to the holy orders for future deacons and priests unabatedly continue throughout the country, not only with large archdioceses, such as Cebu and Palo, and dioceses within the National Capital Region such as Cubao but also with the dioceses in the provinces, such as Maasin and San Carlos.

Through direct correspondences with the ‘ordinandi’ or those who are to be ordained, it is notable that proper protocols are still being observed amid the stringent COVID-19 measures to be followed from the national to the local. The rules are crosschecked according to specific time-bound mandates. And, these mandates empirically correspond to the number of COVID cases in an area.

The ordination in Cubao last 13th of June 2020, for instance, had no other visitors that even if there were two ‘ordinandi’, the maximum number was only 10, following national mandates then. During concelebrated masses where there are two or more priests, only the celebrant drinks the chalice and that priests are enjoined in their masses to use their own chalices. This provides the blueprint for the following days and Sunday masses. Communion is strictly done by the hand with due reverence, pews are cued with social distancing marks and doors are properly designated with single entrances and exits to avoid traffic and possible intersections. One inevitable circumstance is that because a large portion of the congregation is elderly with no phones, contact tracing is done manually with pens and papers already prearranged on their seats. There is an hour interval for cleaners to disinfect the church. There is no choir except for a singer with an instrument. There is only one lector for all with no sacristans, and sometimes, only the priest does all this.

In the province of Southern Leyte, particularly in the town of Cabali-an (San Juan), an ordination last 31st of October 2020 took place for a local. The excitement of the faithful in the area is intensified given that it has not produced a priest for decades, so the municipal inter-agency task force made sure

that only 10% of the building capacity, a revised protocol this time around, will only attend the event. With a large quaint and Hispanic church, only 220 members were allowed to enter, with masks and social distancing.

With the successful ordinations in the year 2020, and upcoming ordinations for 2021, there are constant inquiries for protocols concerning the percentage of attendance or prohibition of festivals and large gatherings. Although masses are virtually online, physical attendance is still encouraged whenever possible. Along with the need for secure gatherings, inevitable circumstances allow for evidence-based regard for other normative aspects of public health. With typhoons annually going in by the last months of the year,⁶ churches have also become shelters and evacuation sites.⁷ For mental health, there have reportedly been no cases of discrimination towards Catholic priests celebrating about breaching the quarantine, which is a different matter for other religious sects such as the Philippine Independent Church.⁸ This is amid the call for help by the government from these religious groups to help in giving hope.⁹ The religious sector, in this regard, has a greater responsibility in slowly recovering from the collateral damage of the pandemic¹⁰ and safely protecting the wellbeing of its faithful whose much-needed trust is evidently shown in the current ordinations of new members of the clergy.

References

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doi: 10.1093/pubmed/fdab104