Catholic church’s mitigating responses to the COVID-19 pandemic globally and in Indonesia

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic has spurred global responses from various sectors, including religious institutions. This research investigates the mitigation efforts of the Catholic Church on a global scale and its particular responses within Indonesia during the pandemic. It employs a mixed-method research design by combining qualitative and quantitative approaches in analysing official Church documents, the data from surveys and qualitative interviews with key stakeholders within the Catholic Church in Indonesia. It shows that the Catholic Church’s responses to the COVID-19 pandemic encompassed various dimensions. Globally, the Church, led by Pope Francis, emphasized solidarity, compassion, and social responsibility, advocating for vaccination programs and debt relief for affected countries. In Indonesia, the Church creatively adapted its worship procedures, emphasizing safety over rituals. It implemented online services, discouraged physical contact, and followed health protocols. Additionally, the Church engaged in charitable outreach, healthcare assistance, psychological support, and educational campaigns. Collaboration with government and non-governmental organizations was pivotal. The findings offer insights into the interplay between religion, science, and public health during pandemics and provide a reference for policymakers, religious leaders, and scholars in similar contexts.

1 Introduction

The rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus in various parts of the world has prompted the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare COVID-19 as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. Previously, on March 2020, Indonesia had announced its first confirmed case of COVID-19. Since then, the number of COVID-19 cases in Indonesia grew significantly, and in many cases, has resulted in death. As of early 2021, Indonesia has recorded 1,037,993 cases with 29,331 deaths (www.covid19.go.id). This figure has placed Indonesia in the top 20 countries with the highest cases of COVID-19 in the world, as well as being the first country in Southeast Asia to reach more than one million cases of COVID-19 [1-4].

Various parties have attempted to resolve this issue. Leaders, both political and religious leaders, have involved in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic since news emerged of the first cases of COVID-19 patients in Indonesia.

Observing that, this research seeks to examine the responses of Catholic religious institutions in their efforts to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. It will analyse the teachings and policies made by the Catholic Church and examine how those teachings and policies were carried out to a concrete level by its adherents.

2 Research methodology

This study employed a mixed-method research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. The qualitative methods were used for understanding the Catholic Church’s responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in a more in-depth manner, while quantitative methods helped gather statistical data related to the impact of these responses. It was also developed by analysing the collected relevant data including official statements, encyclicals, and circulars issued by Pope Francis and the Bishops’ Conference of Indonesia (KW1). It also included the results of qualitative interviews which had been conducted with key stakeholders within the Catholic Church especially priests and church members who were actively involved in pandemic responses. The interviews provided in-depth insights and personal perspectives on the institutional responses of the Catholic on the pandemic which provides data of the perceptions

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and behaviours of Catholic Church members regarding pandemic responses.

This research would contribute to the understanding of how religious institutions respond to global crises, particularly to the COVID-19 pandemic, and their impact on the society. It provides insights into the adaptability of religious institutions and the role of technology and science in shaping their responses to contemporary challenges. The findings may serve as a reference for policymakers, religious leaders, and scholars interested in the intersection of religion and public health during a pandemic.

3 Views of the Catholic Church on the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has left the world feeling powerless and uncertain in the realms of health sciences, medicine, and medical technology, there was a pressing need for the active participation and responses of religious institutions. Theologically, in the challenging times like during pandemic, the world requires a form of public theology that is both contextually relevant and capable of making a meaningful impact to the life of the people.

Jürgen Habermas’ ideas about the public sphere and the role of civil society, including institutional religious are very relevant in this regard [5, 6]. Institutional religions should not be confined to the purely private spiritual realm but need to be actively involved in contributing to seeking common prosperity, including finding a way out of this global pandemic crisis. This effort is also known as public theology, that is, as defined by Ted Peters, a theology developed by the church and critically reflected in academic (scientific) processes in the real life of the wider community for the common good.[7] Siaw Fung Chong in his article titled The Role of Theology in the Post-(COVID-19) Pandemic World mentions the five pillars of public theology namely, pastoral, apologetic, scientific, political and prophetic [8].

Prophetically and pastorally, Pope Francis, as the supreme leader of Catholics around the world, emphasized in his catechesis on Wednesday, August 5, 2020 that this pandemic continues to leave deep wounds, exposing human fragility. On every continent, there are many people who died, many who were infected. Many people and many families face moments of uncertainty, due to various socio-economic problems that are mainly experienced by the very poor. And because of that, it is necessary to reflect on how this restoration of the world can be carried out. As disciples of the Lord Jesus, who is a healer of soul and body, every Christian is called to continue His work of healing and saving physically, socially, and spiritually [9].

In his catechesis on September 23, 2020, the Pope also stated that in order to come out better from a crisis like the present, which is a health crisis and, at the same time, a social, political, and economic crisis, each of us is called to take responsibility. We cannot respond only individually, but also as a community to which we belong, from the role we have in society, from our principles, and because we are people of faith in God [9].

Pope Francis and the bishops appealed to Catholics to set an example for the community in breaking the chain of the COVID-19 virus by upholding and adhering to health protocols, participating in vaccination programs, and carrying out concrete acts of solidarity to help victims of the COVID-19 virus, as well as collaborating with the government and the wider community to overcome this global pandemic.

3.1 Catholic social teachings in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic

In March 2020, when the Corona Virus claimed many victims, Pope Francis as the highest leader of the Catholic Church held an Urbi et Orbi blessing or ‘blessing to the city of Rome and to the whole world’ who were suffering from the pandemic. He conveyed the message that all human beings are in the same boat, all are fragile and have lost their way, but at the same time, it is important and necessary to feel called to row together, in the midst of a storm, to strengthen one another, and to work together to overcome the global disaster.

On October 3, 2020, at the tomb of Saint Francis of Assisi in Italy, Pope Francis signed an encyclical titled “Fratelli Tutti” which speaks of brotherhood/sisterhood and social friendship [10]. He invites everyone to emulate Saint Francis of Assisi who sees all beings as his brothers and sisters in order to inspire all Christians to find new creative ways for one another and stay connected to one another amidst isolation due to COVID-19 lockdowns.

Pope Francis criticized all forms of individualism and selfishness in the midst of this global disaster. He emphasized that in a dark moment like this we realize that we are connected to each other, therefore we cannot get out of this pandemic alone, but we need to work together and care for one another, helping one another. He criticized the greed and individualistic attitude of certain countries, which tend to commercialize vaccines and medical equipment amidst the suffering and needs of other countries. Pope Francis underlined the spirit of sharing and collaborating, not the spirit of competing and taking advantage of each other.

Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Catholic Church placed great emphasis on the spirit of social solidarity in dealing with the global disaster. The Church is inspired by the stories of solidarity, empathy and compassion of Jesus himself in His time [11, 12]. The heart of Jesus is always moved by compassion to help victims and people in trouble. As a follower of Jesus, the Church is driven and inspired by the same spirit of Jesus’ love and mercy.

Pope Francis strongly emphasized his concern for the victims of the pandemic, especially the poor, the weak, and the neglected, as well as the environment that has been damaged by the modern human way of life [13]. According to the Pope, the coronavirus pandemic has given the world the opportunity to develop a new way of life. He encouraged all of humanity to try to limit the rise in global temperatures to below 1.5°C and also advocated for debt relief for the poorest and most affected countries.
by COVID-19. The Pope also advocated for justice to isolated tribal communities that are marginalized by national and international mining regulations and urged that indigenous communities should be protected from abuse of power by multinational mining companies.

The Pope explained that the pandemic has shown that the earth can renew itself if humankind gives it time to rest. The air became cleaner, the water clearer, and animals returned to places where they had disappeared. On September 1, 2020, in the Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, Pope Francis connected this ethical call to rest with the biblical teaching regarding the Jubilee Year, namely as a sacred time to remember, return, rest, restore, and rejoice [14].

The Jubilee year is a time full of grace to remember that we live in a relationship with God the Creator, with fellow human beings, and with all creatures that exist in a common home. We need to remember that every creature and everything is in needs to be cared for.

The Pope also reminded everyone that the Year of Jubilee is a time to turn back in repentance; that human has damaged the bonds of relationship with the Creator, with fellow humans, and with fellow creatures, therefore, there is a serious need to heal and restore those damaged relationships, especially with the poor, the weak, and the neglected. He stressed further that the pandemic, seen in the light of Jubilee Year, is the time to liberate the oppressed and all those victimized by modern forms of slavery, including trafficking of adults and children.

For him, the pandemic as a Jubilee Year also means a time to listen to the voice of creation and that humans are part of a web of interdependence among beings, not masters over others. A pandemic is a call that awakens the world from its long sleep in a system of greed and over-consumption that destroys or disintegrates biodiversity, increases natural disasters due to climate change and global warming, which exacerbates the impact of the pandemic we are experiencing on the poor and destitute.

Because of this, Pope Francis proclaimed the 2020 pandemic year as “a time for restorative justice” and asked for debt relief for poor countries because of their difficulties in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic disaster, which caused crises in various fields. Regarding the need to restore nature, Pope Francis emphasized that climate restoration is something that is very important because we are all in the midst of a climate emergency and are running out of time.

The Pope encouraged his people to join the vaccination program. He called it an act of love for the common good [13]. He really appreciates the hard work of the medical team, especially the researchers and scientists who have discovered vaccines. He emphasized that vaccines have brought hope to humanity to end the pandemic, but stressed that this would be achieved if vaccines were made available to everyone and if all parties collaborated.

3.2 New Ways of worship in the catholic church in indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic: A mitigating approach to the pandemic

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early March 2020, the government of the Republic of Indonesia has issued Government Regulation (Peraturan Pemerintah) Number 21 of 2020 concerning Large-Scale Social Restrictions in the Context of Accelerating the Management of Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). The Large-Scale Social Restrictions regulation also called for an adjustment in communal worship and religious rituals.

The Catholic Church in Indonesia welcomes the instructions and the government regulations. The bishop, as the highest leader in each diocese, followed this up by issuing circulars to all parishes and people in their respective dioceses.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected various aspects of life, including the procedures for worship in the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church places the safety and the wellbeing of the people and the entire community above ritual and sacramental interests. Since the pandemic, the Catholic Church has creatively and innovatively followed health protocols and adjusted its worship procedures.

Services such as mass or Eucharistic celebrations were still carried out but without any physical participation of the faithful. The communion ritual, in which the consecrated hosts are usually distributed directly to the people waiting in line, was abolished in order to avoid direct physical contact, both between the priest and the people and between one person and another. Communion was changed to the “Inner Communion Prayer” for people who attended mass online followed by prayer after communion, which was contextualized during the pandemic. The faithful attended services online from their respective places through live streaming or through television broadcasts. This is applied to all forms of worship, including the celebration of major holidays such as Holy Week, Easter, Christmas, and so on [15-17].

The church formulated liturgical-pastoral breakthroughs in facing and overcoming the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The breakthrough was made not only at the local level but globally. The universal church, following the direction of Pope Francis, issued a decree on simplification of worship during the pandemic, which was followed and adapted by bishops in their respective dioceses to parishes around the world. By the mandate of Pope Francis, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments on March 25, 2020 issued a decree entitled ‘In Tempo di COVID-19’ or ‘At the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic’ as a complement to its decree on March 19, 2020 with the aim of providing directions regarding liturgical and sacramental adjustments during the COVID-19 Pandemic, especially in relation to the celebration of Palm Sunday Mass, Chrism Mass, Maundy Thursday Mass, Good Friday, and Saturday Vigil. The decree was translated and followed by all dioceses and parishes as well as all forms of worship services within the scope of the Catholic Church throughout the world. The aim was to break the chain of the spread of the Corona Virus by completely avoiding physical touches in every liturgical celebration through physical distancing and various health protocols which resulted in the form of elimination of...
4 Some solidarity actions by the catholic churches and institutions during COVID-19 pandemic globally and in Indonesia

To express their solidarity with the people and communities affected by the Pandemic, the Catholic Church Institutions organized concrete solidarity actions through various activities such as:

(a) **Charitable Outreach**: Catholic Churches engaged in charitable work, including distributing food, clothing, and other essentials to those in need. During the pandemic, they increased their efforts to support vulnerable individuals and communities affected by job losses and economic hardships.

(b) **Healthcare Assistance**: Many Catholic hospitals and healthcare facilities in Indonesia and worldwide provided medical care and resources for COVID-19 patients. They expanded their services to accommodate more patients during the pandemic, including setting up temporary healthcare facilities.

(c) **Psychological and Spiritual Support**: Catholic Churches offered spiritual guidance and emotional support to help individuals cope with the stress and grief associated with the pandemic. This involved online counseling, prayer services, and pastoral care.

(d) **Education and Awareness**: They also played important roles in disseminating accurate information about COVID-19 prevention and safety measures. They organized awareness campaigns and distributed educational materials to wider communities.

(e) **Fundraising and Donations**: Catholic Churches also initiated fundraising efforts to collect donations for pandemic relief. These funds were used to purchase medical supplies, provide financial assistance to those in need, or support local healthcare facilities.

(f) **Providing Shelter**: Some churches offered shelter and accommodations to homeless individuals or those who could not safely quarantine at home, helping to reduce the spread of the virus.

(g) **Collaboration with Government and NGOs**: The Catholic churches also collaborated with government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to coordinate relief efforts effectively. They leveraged their local networks and resources to reach communities in need.

(h) **Support for Vulnerable Groups**: They also gave special attention to vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, orphaned children, and people with disabilities, to ensure that they receive adequate care and support during the pandemic.

(i) **Vaccination Drives**: As vaccines became available, Catholic Churches have participated in vaccination drives, encouraging their congregations and communities to get vaccinated to curb the spread of the virus.

5 Conclusion

As is commonly known, religions have significant roles in shaping the worldview and behaviour of their communities. Religious leaders have a reliable influence in determining the attitudes of their people.

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has become a global disaster and has infected hundreds of millions of people, and caused millions of deaths and ravaged the global economy which has brought misery to mankind, religious leaders and their communities can play vital roles in educating, encouraging, mitigating, and assisting those who involve in addressing common challenges of the pandemic.

The Catholic Church institution, which is the focus of this research, has shown an example of joint efforts to overcome this global pandemic. The Catholic Church through Pope Francis as the highest leader of the universal church reflects on the challenges of the times in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic based on the Scriptures and church traditions as well as theological reflections by paying attention to inputs and findings from science and technology. Pope Francis representing the universal church calls for solidarity with the victims, especially those who are weak, poor and neglected. The Pope asked for global solidarity to stand shoulder to shoulder and help one another overcome the calamity.

The Pope also encouraged all Catholics and all of humankind to work together across borders and institutions, to hear the input of health experts, pandemic experts and to comply with health protocols and all proven procedures to deal with the threat of COVID-19 and also formulate solutions to deal with this disaster for the common good. The Pope underlined that all forms of efforts to save ourselves and others from the Corona pandemic are acts of love which are the main teachings of Jesus himself.

Pope Francis’ appeals were followed up by the Catholic Church universally up to the local communities at the grassroots. The Church in Indonesia, through the bishops who are members of the Bishops’ Conference of Indonesia (KWI) continues the messages of the Pope to each diocese and to all parishes within the diocese up to the basic ecclesiastical communities, and to all Catholic families and individuals in order to implement it in everyday life including in the form of charitable social work to help governments, institutions, communities, and people in need as well as various adjustments and harmonization of ritual worship procedures in places of worship.

Several important points can be learned from the policies taken by the Catholic Church, namely, first, the Catholic Church sees that health, safety, and the wellbeing of the people and the common good are the primary law of life. Life needs to be preserved. The good of the people is more important than the fulfillment of religious rituals. Second, religious rituals need consider the concrete conditions and demands of the real situation of the faithful and the surrounding community. Religious rituals are not rigid, fixed, and dead but rather responsive and adaptive to the concrete situation that is taking place in the real life. Facing a pandemic that threatens individual and collective
life, religious institutions need to harmonize the implementation of existing religious rites without reducing their meaning and purposes. Third, religious institutions can take advantage of available technology and knowledge. Information and communication technology as well as discoveries or inventions in the medical world such as vaccinations, medicines, health protocols during a pandemic have greatly assisted the efforts of religious communities in dealing with and overcoming the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as enabling religions to carry out religious activities online. Even though the faithful cannot attend onsite, all activities are still running online. With the help of technology and science, religions can adapt to the new normalcy in this kind of difficult times.

Moreover, COVID-19, as a global pandemic that damages and threatens the world globally requires broad contributions, handling, cooperation, and collaboration. Religious institutions have played their role properly and effectively. This contribution is real and has an impact on the ability of the Indonesian people and the world to slowly get out of the Corona Virus threat. These concrete responses and actions should serve as an example for other religious institutions including government agencies, community organizations and so on to get involved in facing and overcoming this pandemic and all kinds of shared problems in local, national, and global communities.

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