

The Role of Women In The “Life After the Pandemic” of Pope Francis

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Melchor Labao Cuizon

Department of Social Sciences, Central Luzon State University, Science City of Munoz, Philippines
cuizonmel@clsu.edu.ph

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on Pope Francis Urbi et orbi (from the city of Rome to the entire world) a papal address that invites humanity to listen to the silent and invisible voices of the field who contributed much to the fight against COVID-19 yet suffered discrimination and inequality. Highlighted in the text were the voices of the field, the vulnerable humanity severely affected by the pandemic yet their works and contributions were made hidden and invisible. These are women behind the pandemic whose dedication as essential workers is unquestionable yet poorly recognized in a male-dominated society. In anticipation of the tragic event that proceeds after the pandemic, the Pope invites everyone to pray and reflect on procuring the grace of God as a fundamental instrument of redirecting one's undesirable attitude toward women an essential key toward integral human development and the rebuilding of humanity in the spirit of solidarity. Thus, the paper exposes the role of women during the pandemic, and (2) argues that gender sensitivity is possible through prayer and reflection as articulated by the Pope

Keywords: Cross-Culture of Religion; Social Harmonization; Social Capital

1. Introduction

Life After Pandemic of Pope Francis is a collection of his eight papal messages addressed to the Church in general which aim at giving hope and solace amid the excruciating pain brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. This collective text of the Pope is instructive, a key direction on how to live life with others after the pandemic. The Urbi et orbi (from the city of Rome to the entire world) is the first collected papal address to humanity and serves as the framework among the eight messages of the Pope. The text is grounded on the confidence of the Pope in the innate goodness of humanity which inclined them to respond to the needs of others by articulating programs and policies for the inclusive interests of all. Highlighted also in the text were the voices of the field, the vulnerable humanity severely affected by the pandemic yet their works and contributions were made hidden and invisible (Francis, 2020). Special mentions in the text were women who worked silently at home to provide the essential and basic needs of the family and as health care providers during the pandemic (8).

Moreover, the message of the Pope anticipates the tragic event which proceeds after the pandemic. These tragic events as argued by the Pope are selfishness and indifference which resulted in inequalities and violence against women. Thus, the Pope invites everyone to pray in procuring the grace of God as a fundamental instrument of redirecting one's undesirable attitude toward women an essential key towards integral human development and the rebuilding of humanity in the spirit of solidarity.

A textual analysis was employed to better grasp the text. Allen (2017) explains that this method provides better insight into understanding social issues from a broader perspective that primarily influences the message of the text being studied. Specifically, this paper exposes the role of women during the pandemic and (2) argues that gender sensitivity is possible through prayer and reflection, as articulated by the Pope.

2. Method

This study used the interpretative analysis method which is grounded on the text of Pope Francis in his book entitled "Life After the Pandemic" (2020) specifically in the chapter *Urbi et orbi*. It also utilizes journal articles retrieved from the search engine primarily indexed in Google Scholar and Research Gate. In navigating the issue to be explored, this research employs textual analysis and hermeneutics. The former pertains to the method of data analysis that focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of a text (Arya, 2020) in this case the "Life after the Pandemic" of Pope Francis. The latter means interpretation and examination of the text to shed light on the lived meaning of experiences of women as cited by the Pope. Thus, the *Urbi et Orbi* is analyzed together with some related journal articles to achieve a coherent view to support the claim of the study. Supporting journal articles was guided by the following keywords *Urbi et Orbis*, faith, gender sensitivity, women discrimination, equality, prayer. Notes were prepared according to themes and relevance and using textual analysis and hermeneutics the text was interpreted highlighting the role of women during the pandemic and how this role may foster an inclusive and gender-sensitive environment or community.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. The role of women during the Covid-19 pandemic

The *Urbi et Orbi* of the Pope is an inclusive invitation to humanity to listen to the primal call of interior conversion. This conversion is the key to restoring the hope that was lost and rebuilding a better world after the crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Generally, the papal message is inclusively addressed to all humanity from the silent and hidden voices of humanity to the government and the head of state to work together for the common good and propose innovative solutions, especially in the work of care (Francis, 2020).

What is remarkable in the message of the Pope is his mention of the people who courageously rendered the basic and essential services amid the risk and danger of COVID-19 infections. Their significant role and contributions in the fight against the deadly virus are notable yet their works are kept silent and invisible (Francis, 2020). Thus, the Pope challenges those in power and policymakers to create rules and laws for the marginalized sectors who despite their efforts and contributions in containing and flattening the curve of infections remain prey to inequalities, discrimination, and all sorts of violence.

These unheard voices of the field were highlighted by Pope Francis. In one of the passages, the Pope is affectionate in addressing the significant role of women in the fight against COVID-19. The Pope expressed this in a passage:

"I think of all the people, especially women, who multiply loaves of bread in soup kitchens: two onions and a package of rice make up a delicious stew for hundreds of children. I think of the sick, I think of the elderly [and of] small farmers and their families who work hard to produce healthy food without destroying nature, without hoarding, without exploiting people's needs" (Francis, 2020, 8).

This is supported by Pope Leo XIII in an encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) that women are by "nature fitted for home-work, and it is that which is best adapted at once to preserve her modesty and to promote the good bringing up of children and the well-being of the family" (*Rerum Novarum*; 42). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020), reported that women spend extra time of an average of four hours per day of uncompensated work than men. This disregarded household responsibilities tasks to women in the time of COVID-19 according to Chauhan (2020) is considered unpaid work which is defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as the non-compensated work mostly carried out by women at home to secure and maintain the necessities needed by the members of the family. The UN Women (2020) and Del Boca et al., (2020) both studies statistically show the burdens of heavy workloads of care-related tasks given to women than men. The studies of Brenan (2020), Germano (2019), and Barroso (2021) both show that women still fulfill a greater portion of the household tasks and even persist amid the pandemic.

According to the Infographics of the European Parliament (2021) of an estimated 49 million care workers, 76 percent of them are exclusively women. Moreover, the suspension of classes due to the risk of COVID-19 infections intensifies these burdens at home which leads to increased household tasks and home-school supervision of children (OECD, 2020). The parents especially the mother are given the greatest challenge of educating their children. In the US for instance, 19 million children live with single parents, and 70% of them are classified as single mothers (Alon et al., 2020). On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity for women across the globe to showcase their innate potential as human resources. Harini et al., (2020) considered the pillars of the family during the health crisis because of their unconditional and relentless dedication at home.

This commitment of women at home during the pandemic was not given so much emphasis and it is only just and fair that this should be highlighted and voiced on the public agenda. The increasing demands of domestic responsibilities of women at home are intensified during the quarantine and lockdown period (Aldossari and Chaudhry, 2021) yet these significant contributions were not fully recognized and appreciated in a male-dominated society. Thus, the stand of the Church as a respective social institution toward a gender-responsive environment has a strong impact on humanity towards the call for unity and equality (Harris, 2014). In addition, the Pope highlighted the work of care during the pandemic hence, this sector is also dominated by women who were instrumental in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. The Pope reiterated this in the following passages:

“However, in many countries, it is an ignored sector: wages are low, hospitals are understaffed, shifts are heavy, and proper contracts and benefits are missing. Many caregivers are informal, working on their own or in the grassroots economy, you have no steady income to get you through this hard time”. (Francis, 2020, 11).

The report of the Philippine Daily Inquirer on September 03, 2020, for instance, ranks the Philippines at the bottom of the pit among Southeast Asia in terms of compensation despite their crucial role in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic (Philippine Daily Inquirer; 2020). The same report was published by Rappler Philippines on September 04, 2021, in which health workers were rallying in the streets and frustrated because of poor working conditions and unreasonable compensation and benefits (Rappler, 2021) according to King (2020), "has brought into sharp focus the need for health care reforms that promote universal access to affordable care".

The message of the Pope at the same time invites humanity especially the head of state and leaders to formulate innovative solutions, especially in the work of care from which the majority of its workers are women (Francis, 2020). The Pope pleads with humanity and those in power to eliminate inequalities that undermined this sector and formulate rules and policies that are gender-responsive and sensitive. The Pope cautioned pretentious leaders to be true to their commitment to healing, sharing, and caring for all sectors of humanity (Francis, 2020). The *Urbi et orbi* of the Pope is a roadmap of humanity, a direction of rebuilding a better world that precedes the COVID-19 crisis, and a recognition of the silent and hidden voices of the field who contributed much in the fight against the deadly coronavirus that plagues the human race in the century.

The reports on social media testify to the valuable contributions of women in the fight against COVID-19. Aldrich and Lotito (2020) report that the leadership of women in managing the COVID-19 pandemic across the globe is more efficient and even "performing better" compared to men. This claim is supported by the New York Times (2020) and Henly and Roy (2020) restating the responsiveness and quickness of women leaders in handling the virus and observing religiously the imposed health protocols. Although women are not likely to be risk-takers compared to men (Mather and Lighthall; 2012), especially in terms of political deliberation (Verge, Guinjoan, and Rodon; 2015), however, they are more attentive and responsive than men in times of crisis. Kamani et al., (2020) describe them as "heroines" of the pandemic because of their decisiveness, swiftness, and quickness in attending to their role and duties against the deadly virus.

This heroic contribution of women was given special recognition by the United Nations Secretary-General who highlighted a gender-sensitive response reverberating the women's role in successful pandemic recovery. The remarks are intended to unconceal the innate potential of women in responding to the health emergency (United Nations, 2020). The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (MOWECP) together with the World Health Organization (WHO) on the other hand, initiated a competition that recognizes this

contribution during the pandemic through comics and illustrations that categorically reflect the spirit and resiliency of women in responding to the health issue. (UN Women, 2020).

It is unfortunate that despite their relevant contributions during the pandemic, they are not exempt from all types of violence and inequalities which according to Kantamneni (2020) was even made worse by the situation. This was supported by the Council of Europe (2021) which recorded several incidents of domestic sexual violence committed against women. The United Nations Women (UNW) for example enumerated some risks that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to women. These risks include the disproportionate increase in unemployment status, the exacerbated disparities of livelihood, and inadequate distribution of care and domestic work (Meagher et al., 2020, 2).

This prejudice and inequalities against women during the pandemic motivated the Pope to include them in his papal address. Thus, mentioning them in the said papal address means the Church is conscious of their sufferings and sacrifices, and in one way or the other the Church wanted to comfort them in their agony against discrimination and inequalities while uplifting their dignity as a human person.

3.2. An Invitation to Prayer and Reflection

The possibility of rebuilding a better world that precedes the COVID-19 crisis and the formulation of policies geared toward integral human development and the fullness of life is possible as the Pope says through prayer. Prayer enables a person to realize that selfishness and indifference can never be a permanent trait but rather a threat to humanity's interconnectedness and peaceful existence. Prayer as an intellectual activity, an act of the will, enables the person to embrace the truth and the determination to grow in love with others (Sheen, 2001, 336). As posited by the Pope the greatest danger in the fight against COVID-19 is not the virus itself rather the selfishness and indifference (p.8) of humanity were the most tragic and painful. Selfishness and indifference have driven humanity to destroy the environment through technocratic paradigms and excessive anthropocentrism (Francis, 2015). The same selfishness and indifference blinded humanity to see that other people lived in desperate and degrading poverty (Francis, 2015: 66 – 67). Selfishness and indifference are the illusion of seeing oneself as superior and having greater rights than others which eventually is the root cause of all inequalities and discrimination, especially for the vulnerable group of society which are women. This conception of vulnerability according to the European Commission Directorate-General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (DG – ECHO, 2016, 10) is not a fixed criterion attached to specific categories of people, and no one is born vulnerable *per se*” (Carter, 2021). Thus, the notion of vulnerability is a product of the social construction of gender norms which limits women to unequal access to resources and caring responsibilities (Carter, 2021).

In response, the Pope urges humanity to pray as a vital element of redirecting one's consciousness from selfishness and indifference to charity, solidarity, and corporate responsibility. The transforming power of prayer is like a burning fire bubbling with good works that enable a person to hope, love, and even share themselves with others (Dubay, 1989;60). This interior conversion of the human person from selfishness and indifference to solidarity and a sense of responsibility to others is possible because the person is oriented towards self – transcendence which opposes any type of discrimination and inequalities (Pope Benedict XVI, 2006, 127). The transforming power of prayer stimulates one to a moral character which is an essential element to integral human development committed to love and care for others in the community regardless of gender orientation. This confirms the study of Marsden, Karagianni, & Morgan (2007) and Neyrinck, Vansteenkiste, & Lens (2006) on the essentiality of prayers in framing the moral character which motivates the overall well-being of the person and develops an optimistic relationship with others (Conti et al., (2003), Masters, (2005), and Seskevich, Crater, & Lane (2004). Because prayer as Sharp et al., (2016) remark is a powerful instrument for managing negative emotions such as anger. Foster (1992) added that this gender-friendly relationship with others is one of the key directions of prayer. Through prayers, the person realizes that selfishness and indifference to the needs of others can never be a permanent trait but rather a hindrance to the harmonious relationship with others (Puchalska Wasyl & Zarzycka, 2019).

It is likely to assume that during the pandemic people recourse to prayer as a powerful defense against the deadly virus. Bentzen (2020) observes the exponential increase of prayer petitions on social media making it the highest search word globally. However, one can always

hope that those prayers uttered by humanity during the COVID-19 health crisis may lead to real conversion towards selfless love and respect for others.

4. Conclusions

Gender is a social construction that specifically determines the role of women and men in society. Traditionally, women are tasked in terms of household management while men are considered the bread winner of the family. This construction of gender roles created a negative impact on women which eventually led to prejudicial treatment against them (Shastri, 2014). These issues of gender inequalities were even made worse at the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the consequences of the pandemic of the century created a worsening impact on the vulnerable sectors of society leading to gender-based violence (UNHCR, 2021). Despite the significant contribution of women during the pandemic, they remained hidden and voiceless in a society that is dominated mostly by men. This unfair gender construction of society can be addressed once the person decides to eliminate selfishness and indifference and recognizes the interconnectedness with others. Thus, Pope Francis is very much convinced that prayer is an integral element of converting the unguided consciousness of the people into a consciousness that is fundamentally grounded on respect, responsibility, and selfless love for others (Francis, 2020).

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7. Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

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