

News from Philippines

In the Philippines, the whole of Luzon including Metro Manila is in lockdown plus 18 provinces all over the country to prevent the spread of virus. The community quarantine started last March 16th, two weeks before the end of the school year. It lasted till April 15th, then was extended till April 30th. Now, from May 1st to 15th. Luzon and National Capital Region remain in enhanced community quarantine while other areas are in total lockdown, those densely populated areas like Tondo in Manila are in hard lockdown. Every corners or end of the streets are guarded by military men.

The differences of level of implementation are based on how did the people behaved on the first wave of implementation of the lockdown. In the provinces and rural areas, people are more disciplined and understood the grave threat of COVID-19. However, there are people who are used to doing their ways that despite of physical distancing measures, they just do what they had been used to despite the spreading virus. At the start of the lockdown, only a few were reported infected by the virus and the number of deaths started to one-digit number. Now, 4th of May, the Department of Health reported that the total number of cases in the country is now at 9,223. The number of recoveries to date is 1,214. The death toll is 607 or 6.58% of the total number of cases. The over-all goal is to reduce the percentage of deaths to less than 1%. But with this unseen enemy attacking even the medical health officers and laboratory workers, the COVID-19 cases keep rising.

The Research Institute for Tropical Medicine, a facility with laboratories capable and certified to run COVID-19 tests, reported that 43 of its laboratory staff tested were positive for the virus. Among those who tested positive were two staff 60 years old and above. Testing and contact tracing are ongoing to have a clearer picture of how the virus reached the facility and to meet the medical needs of patients. The Infection Prevention and Control Committee and Safety Office of RITM has also issued stricter guidelines to reduce the possibility of further spread of the infection. They are doing great tasks for the nation, but they are also vulnerable to COVID-19 infection. The institute director admitted that COVID-19 outbreak “is one of the hardest” they’ve dealt with. “It’s hard to fight an enemy that you don’t know much about”, she explained.

All across the country people are struggling to figure out some of life’s basic necessities due to the corona virus. Reports and revised health guidelines keep changing on a daily basis. After the ban on mass gatherings, there were no more eucharistic celebrations and other activities. However, the faithful could still watch Masses as the social media accounts of Chuch run Radio Veritas 846 and

TV Maria broadcast Masses and other religious activities. Other dioceses and prelatures aired Sunday mass through radio broadcast.

The Philippine government is doing its job of securing the health and safety of the people, yet Covid-19 cases still rises. The Church heeds the call of the government for the safety of everyone. The Church leadership fully cooperate with the government at this time of national crisis. However, with the Chief Executive's 'martial law-type role directive for military and police in the implementation of lockdown measures, the people lose hope, feel afraid and uncertain. Those who lost their loved ones because of the outbreak experienced suffering, grief and pain. Some people may have senseless violation of quarantine rules, but the use of supposed violation of rules to arrest those delivering relief aids to the poor seems out of the question.

How do the Filipinos live this crisis? What is the impact of the crisis to the poor people who thrive on daily wages?

There are civic spirited individuals who, despite the restrictions of the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ), braved the outbreak to extend a helping hand and get involved in the distribution of goods to families living in the rural areas. The COVID-19 pandemic become an opportunity for them to reach out to the poor families who live on daily wage and those working groups that belong to the "no work no pay" section of the population and to the senior citizens. We were touched by their efforts. This good acts help raised hope of the people that soon COVID-19 will come to an end.

The *spirit of bayanihan* is awakened among the Filipino people from the private sectors. They send the frontliners PPEs (Personal Protective Equipments) and other medical supplies because private hospitals experience a scarcity of PPE too!; There are food chain owners who donate food and the delivery *kuyas* (big brothers) who are frontliners as well; hotel chain owners providing free lodging because we have difficulty going home; bicycle owners who lend their bikes for free; grocery owners setting up a priority lane so we the frontliners can have more time to rest after duty; the people who keep on praying for us and our safety too; and of course, everyone who are trying their best to do their share by "staying at home." We clap our hands and pay tribute to the men and women who have generously shared their resources to the most vulnerable. The Project Ugnayan led by the top business groups from different industries also helped augment the food needs of the people. This is in cooperation with the Philippine Disaster Resilience Foundation and Caritas Manila, priests and volunteers go house-to-house in distributing P1,000 grocery gift certificates and food to the poor communities of Greater Metro Manila.

Distribution channels were further expanded in partnership with ABS-CBN, one of the leading television channels in the country, the Asian Development Bank and the government's "Bayan Bayanihan!" and Jollibee's FoodAID program. The overall name of this initiative is "Pantawid ng Pagibig" (Bridge of Love) program. This initiative helped bridge the needs of poor families and the families of those who lose their opportunity to earn because of the stay at home policy. Now ABS-CBN is forced to go off the air. National Telecommunications Commission ordered ABS-CBN to stop broadcasting.

As for the Teacher Teams, the spirit of looking for each other is best shown. A group chat was created by the central team office bearers. Each team has initiative of sharing their love and concern to most needy neighbors in their respective community by sharing their foods and other goods to poor neighbors. The team members who lived in the same community agreed to have this initiative of helping others within the neighborhood.

We are walking through difficult times. We all unite in prayers, and join the world in praying. We earnestly call on God to deliver our world, our country, and our communities from the COVID-19 pandemic. The people are encouraged to pray to stop COVID-19. Church bells rang at noon and 8:00 pm daily to rally the people to pray "Oratio Imperata" to fight the spreading virus. Although some may be having reservations about these acts, many believe that only God has the power to stop it from spreading.

(It took longer for me to send this email because of poor internet connection in our place. Internet cafes are closed.)

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