

*Religious-Digital Activism in the Time of COVID-19:  
A Discourse Analysis of the #ChurchInAction*

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**Abstract**

In a predominantly Christian nation like the Philippines where the critique of the long-standing religious-normative ideals and traditions has expanded to the digital space, the church hierarchy and its faithful have not shied away from making their claims and defenses known through a subtle but effective digital strategy of hashtag activism. This paper seeks to explore how the Philippine Catholic church has defended itself from the proliferation of fake news, particularly during the height of the global pandemic, to discredit its social posture and agency with the utilization of the hashtag #ChurchInAction. The paper collects and gathers postings from social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram among others that incorporate the said hashtag and a cursory discourse analysis will be employed to draw out intentions, meanings, and ideologies. With this, it attempts to contribute to the scholarship of digital activism that is uniquely ecclesial and religious in nature and character.

Keywords: COVID-19, Church, Social Media

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## Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. A day after, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte announced that the entire Metro Manila (and later the entire Luzon and major areas in the country) shall be placed under enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) starting from March 15, 2020 to April 14, 2020. It was further extended until May 15, 2020, with the recommendation of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID) (Lopez, 2020). Since then, periodic and localized lockdowns have been implemented depending on the extent of contagion and hospital capacity. While the government at first hesitated to call it a "lockdown" for fear of creating panic among its people, it was later confirmed as equivalent to a total lockdown with strict restrictions against non-essential travel (Esguerra, 2020). Because of this, most of the business establishments and workplaces have to close or reduce their operations. In a report by the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) last March 19, 2020, it projected that these lockdown measures could cause a significant amount of losses to the country's real GDP growth with people from vulnerable sectors of society as the most affected (NEDA, 2020). This was later confirmed in a published survey conducted by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) last July 2020 reporting that due to the closure or reduced operation of most businesses, many workers were either laid off from their jobs or granted leaves, or had hours and salaries reduced (ADB, 2020). Aside from a huge number of Filipino workers losing their jobs, there were also those business owners of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) who had lost their source of income because they had to close their stores and shops and eventually run low in cash and equity to sustain operations (Pabalan & Macaraan, 2021).

To soften the blow of such lockdowns, the government responded with the implementation of the emergency subsidy program (ESP) as mandated under the Republic Act (R.A.) No. 11469 or the "Bayanihan to Heal as One Act". Under this program, the government would assist families qualified as "low-income households" amounting to Php5000 - 8000 (US\$98-157) for April and May 2020. Despite the hefty sum of money that the government had allocated, "it took months for the aid to be distributed" due to some concerns and issues on logistics and security among others (Abad, 2021). There were logistical challenges with access to remote villages in some provinces and the validation of lists of 18 million poor families as beneficiaries. There were also reports of armed assault against security officers distributing cash aids that resulted in the deaths of government front liners and village residents. As lockdowns intensified during this time, people were getting hungrier and agitated. On the ground, some people were more heavily hit than others and there was a sense of urgency in striking a balance between saving people's lives by imposing strict measures or sustaining their livelihood by easing restrictions.

It was obvious that the government could not do it alone and sole dependence on the government's fiscal stimulus programs and cash transfer incentives could have a significant blow to the country's economy moving forward. The private sector and NGOs had initiated their own donations and volunteerism projects donating medical supplies and personal protective equipment (PPEs) to health workers and hospitals as well as pledging to provide financial aid to their affected employees. Some restaurants and food establishments delivered ready-to-eat meals to health workers, police, and soldiers at checkpoints. Some of the big businesses had offered their facilities as quarantine areas for COVID-19 patients. There were manufacturing establishments that provided temporary shelters to some of their employees who lived far from their factories and shuttle services to others. Some companies had donated food packs

and essential hygiene kits to remote villages and communities. Major utility companies have also extended credit to their customers to ease their concerns about payments of bills. Free temporary lodging was also provided by some motel and hotel chains to medical front-liners. Insurance companies have expanded health coverage to their clients as well as free coverage to health workers. Airline industries had chartered some cargo flights to support emergency response initiatives. Some companies donated ambulances, medical equipment, and disinfecting apparatus to both government and private hospitals.

### **Where is the Church?: The #ChurchInAction**

Amid this generous and engaged involvement of the business and private sector, the onset of ECQ saw an emerging conversation in social media, particularly on *Facebook*. Some people had begun to question the church's participation or its lack thereof, specifically the Catholic religious institution. Merely three days into ECQ, on March 18, 2020, Vivian Velez, director-general of the Film Academy of the Philippines, posted on her *Facebook* account, "*Simbahang katoliko... ano na? paramdam naman po kayo sa pagtulong sa crisis*" (Catholic church... what now? make your presence felt to provide help during this crisis). This post has since been shared 1,400 times. A day after on March 19, 2020, Roberto Tiglao, a columnist for *The Manila Times*, posted on his *Twitter* account a more direct accusation against the church,

WHERE IS THE CHURCH? [sic] What are the CBCP [Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines] Philippines, the Jesuits, Dominicans etc doing to help the country fight this virus and provide the poor with the food they need. Can't the Archbishop of Manila sell some of his P20 billion shares in BPI [Bank of the Philippine Islands] to fund the war vs Covid?

Tiglao's post was retweeted 356 times. Six days later on March 25, 2020, Tiglao detailed his criticism in a column entitled, "Where is the Church?" He accused the Catholic church of its inactivity and absence in the height of peoples' starvation and hunger during ECQ, "Where are they [church hierarchy] now when tens of thousands of human lives are being snuffed out by a disease they are not doing anything to fight?" (Tiglao, 2020). He argued that the ecclesial institution must be more proactive than ever before and must avoid resorting to the usual donation drives where the institution merely acts as a conduit or channel of aid from its benefactors and sponsors. The church, he opined, must use its vast resources and huge financial wealth to provide urgent assistance to affected people during this crisis.

While the Philippines is a predominantly Catholic nation with about 81% of its population identified with Roman Catholicism and the peoples' lifeworld deeply imbued with Catholic cosmologies and expressions (Macaraan, 2019), Canceran (2016) argues that secularism has weakened the authority of the church hierarchy among its faithful and that "religion is no longer controlled by organized religion but has been democratized through the personal agency". In the days after Tiglao's controversial column, *Facebook* had become the venue for people to express their thoughts and sentiments as they engaged in this emerging issue of the church's (non-)involvement during the ECQ. The digital space has provided an opportunity for people to express their opinions or stances on matters of social events and issues (Barton and Lee 2013). While the issue had been divisive and the weeks that passed saw strong partisanship among many Filipinos on social media, a collective action to challenge the anti-church sentiments had started to emerge on *Facebook* through the increased frequency of using the hashtag #ChurchInAction.

The use of a # symbol followed by a word or phrase in many social networking sites (SNSs) like *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Instagram* among others is a common practice nowadays and is usually intended as a metadata tag to facilitate classification and indexing purposes (Marlow et al. 2006). Hash-tagging becomes a hyperlink so that the post/s can be saved in a certain depository and any reader who clicks that link (hashtag) can have access to any other posts that feature the same tag (Scott, 2015). A text or image therefore that is posted in any SNSs with an accompanying hashtag has considerable capacity for connectivity and mobilization. No wonder, many of today's movements and collective efforts have significantly been aided by digital media and its use of hashtags. The "Occupy" movement around the world, the "unibrennt" movement in Vienna and the "Umbrella" movement in Hongkong among others utilized hashtags for people to follow conversations and updates which was a powerful means to building what Anderson (1983, 2006) refers to as "imagined communities" where people "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). In hashtag activism, there is an achievement of what Stewart & Schultze (2019) refer to as "affective attunement" where beyond the ability to understand the world of the other persons, there is also the matching of the other's emotional state with affective expressions resulting to a level of intersubjectivity of shared emotions. For Zappavigna (2015), the connective power of hash-tagging gives rise to "ambient affiliation" where a bond is formed based mainly on topics of interest.

In contrast with these movements that resulted in mass protest and collective mobilization, the #ChurchInAction is more oriented towards establishing a connective action rather than a collective action. Stewart & Schultze (2019) attribute connective action to online-based protests that do not "involve the active engagement of protestors' physical bodies" (2). As the pandemic restricts mass gatherings, the most people could do at the height of this hashtag activism was to post and share images, photos, status, and updates of the prosocial activities and initiatives performed by church leaders and institutions during the ECQ in response to the anti-church narratives perpetrated by some groups in society. Aside from clicking the like button and other emoticons of affirmation on *Facebook*, these people also posted comments of support and encouragement for the efforts initiated by church institutions and groups.

### **The Faith-Based Catholic Groups: Analysis of Usage of #ChurchInAction**

This paper explores the nuances of the #ChurchInAction as a form of religious activism on digital platforms by gathering and examining *Facebook* status posts of three (3) identified faith-based Catholic groups that have used the said hashtag in many of their posts specifically from March to April 2020 - the height of the ECQ lockdown. These groups are the Caritas Manila (CM), Tugon ng Pastol (TP), and Saint Anthony Shrine - Sampaloc Manila (SAS).

While the main beneficiaries of these organizations differ, the main source of funds as well as the nature of assistance provided are similar. Among the three however, it is only the Caritas Manila that extends its coverage of assistance to various parts of the country whereas both St. Anthony Shrine and Tugon ng Pastol are limited to within their vicinity and territory since they do not have any local chapters and they are not national organizations, unlike the Caritas Manila which is national in scope and has local and regional chapters in many parts of the country (see Table 1).

	Caritas Manila	St. Anthony Shrine	Tugon ng Pastol
Main Beneficiary	Mostly jeepney drivers	Mostly homeless, students, and medical frontliners	Mostly kids and elderly
Assistance provided	Mostly food and in-kind donations	goods and services (free haircut)	Meals and food packages
Source of funds	Mainly sourced out from donations	Mainly sourced out from donations	Mainly sourced out from donations
Extent of coverage	Nationwide through regional and local chapters	Within parish territory	Vicinity near the parish

Table 1: Nature and extent of the actual assistance provided

In exploring the social media posts of the organizations, it is evident that a large percentage of such constitute photos that involve the recipients or donees and the donated goods and food packs. This is expected as these organizations believe that as this assistance is made possible only because of the donations by people, they owe the donors at least proof that their generosity has indeed benefited the target vulnerable sectors of society (see Table 2).

Category	Caritas Manila	St. Anthony Shrine	Tugon ng Pastol	Number	Percent
Selfies/Group photos	5	5	2	12	15%
Recipients/Donees	25	5	5	35	43.75%
Donations/Food packs/Services	12	3	6	21	26.25%
Posters/Leaflets	5	0	0	5	6.25%
Text-image/Memes	2	0	0	2	2.5%
Miscellaneous	1	2	2	5	6.25%
Total postings	50	15	15	80	100%

Table 2: Types of images accompanied by #ChurchInAction

In #ChurchInAction, online activism facilitates mass protests without any formal structure. For Greijdanus et al (2020), it is an entirely new form of connective action characterized by bottom-up mobilization that occurs when calls to action cascade through interconnected personal networks. The informal structure that online activism creates is characterized by more individualized and fluid identifications than traditional social movements (Stewart & Schultze, 2019). Within the framework of connective action, geographically distributed Internet users participate in digital activism through self-motivation and personalized actions about contentious issues through mediated communication to facilitate public engagement (Wang & Zhou, 2021). In activism taking place on the Internet, connective action is driven mainly by self-motivated activists. Hence, one would expect a degree of decentralization as participants voluntarily take initiatives to generate content relevant to the collective goal and to keep the information flow going (Wang & Zhou, 2021).

	Caritas Manila	St. Anthony Shrine	Tugon ng Pastol
Connective Action	Highly evident	Moderately evident	Less evident
Affective Attunement	Strongly manifested	Moderately manifested	Less manifested

Table 3: E-movement (Internet-based)

Following the framework proposed by Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia (2014), there are four stages in the development of protests using social media technologies, namely, 1. triggering event, 2. media response, 3. viral organization, and 4. physical response. Each one of these stages is complementary and follows one another in an imperfect and not predictable cycle. For the first stage, the triggering event is no other than the posts of Velez and Tiglaio at the onset of pandemic lockdowns where both criticize the lack of active involvement in assisting the general public. Soon thereafter, the media response is overwhelming as people share and retweet the postings. In response to that, religious organizations begin posting their actions of assistance on social media using the #ChurchInAction. The last stage is the physical response of the people who not only donate cash and goods but also offer their own time and services to distribute aid to the needy. Indeed, "solidarity is accomplished when emotions (e.g., rage, awe, joy) that are experienced at the individual level are made collective" (Stewart & Schultze, 2019).

While many of these people who performed collective action do not know one another, what transpired was "imagine collectives" which is characterized by individuals who "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1983). Affective attunement represents not only the desire and ability to understand and respect another's inner world but also the matching of the other's emotional state with affective expressions to achieve a level of intersubjectivity where emotions are perceived as shared (Stern, 1985).

	Caritas Manila	St. Anthony Shrine	Tugon ng Pastol
Collective Action	Less evident	Highly evident	Moderately evident
Shared (embodied) experience	Less manifested	Strongly manifested	Moderately manifested

Table 4: Identity movement (Internet-enabled)

## **Conclusion**

The pandemic has raised questions that may change moral views and compass. In response to the suffering caused by the pandemic, there are widespread calls for solidarity that encourage people to prioritize public health concerns over one's self-interest. The pandemic has accentuated issues of inequality in society, necessitating not only the government to perform its obligation to aid the people, particularly the vulnerable sectors but also the private and non-governmental groups to contribute to the issue of hunger, dearth of resources, and other pandemic-related sufferings. Religion for one has provided the meaning that people need to recover from a current crisis (Horstmann, 2011).

The success of #ChurchInAction is largely attributed to social media where participants formed themselves as one community of connected individuals. One's social identity is drawn from one's perceptions of in-group membership. People's ecstatic sharing of stories on social media alongside the #ChurchInAction helped in the promotion of shared emotions or feelings for the victims. This study has revealed that the #ChurchInAction has bonded people and served to convoke communities of feelings, without the participants interacting with one another.

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