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Transformative Leaders: Reflection on Priesthood in the Midst of Covid-19 Pandemic in the District of Sleman - Yogyakarta

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Abstract:

Every darkness brings its own hidden light. The Covid-19 pandemic has shocked everyone and forced them to think about their existence and identity in a new fashion. This pandemic creates a crisis and a challenge to pass through this tough experience to a richer mode of life. Priests are called to think again about their identity and the meaning of being a priest in this pandemic. This research aims to know creative ways of the priests in the District of Sleman to undergo their mission as leaders of the Catholic community, especially in leading the parish to be a transformative Church that commits herself to solidarity and responsibility to the suffering of the people without any discrimination. Observation has been taken through a quantitative research and deep discussion with personal experiences of the priests. In this pandemic, any priest is called to take the first step to engage themselves in a web of cooperation and collaboration with people from different backgrounds. Priests are called to transform themselves to be able to lead other people into transformation. They should be transformative leaders of the community.

Keywords:

Leadership, Transformative, Covid-19, Priesthood, Collaboration

Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 on December 2019 in Wuhan, China, this virus infection has spread through out the world. It has caused humanitarian crisis around the globe. The countries are still grappling

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with the health emergency that treathens people of all ages and status.[1] It is not simply a matter of health, but econ0mic, social, religious critical phenomena as well. It resulted in the suffering of the people, especially the vulnerable members of the societies, that is the poor who are economically and socially affected. It is critical in the deepest meaning of the word: a time to make a decision. It is not a time to a debate and discusion in a television program. It is not a time to preaching. It is a time to make concrete actions to carry out. It challenges all people to make the first step to walk through and to extend their hand to bring help and assistance to fellow people in need. All institutions are competing together to provide any sanitarian and humanitarian helps to those who directly or indirectly affected by the pandemic. The Catholic Church as a great institution cannot stay indifferent in front of the suffering of the people, rather it has to take necessary decisions and actions to engage the Catholics in any effort to manifest solidarity and responsibility to the suffering of other. In this crisis, the presence of priests as the pastors of the community will be decisive. They could not stay rigid on the programs listed in the annual work program of the parish, but should be creative to bring transformation in their own lives and to extend this transformation among the Catholics.

This paper will discuss how in this crisis priests should embody a transformative leadership which is an integral part of the Diocese's pastoral focus of 2020, that is to be a transformative Catholics. Being a transformative Catholic begins with those who are entrusted to manifest the deep reality of the Church in the first line, that are the priests. As the pastors of the community, priests should have a capacity to go out from themselves, from their habit and routine to be inspirative, challenging, and transformative leaders. It doesn't depend only on personal characteristic of the priests, but also on their capacity to know the reality of the world, to understand the need of the people, to find out the way to meet their desire, and finally to influence other people to work together to gain their purposes for the good of all.

The objective of this article is to explore the intitatives of the priests in the District of Sleman in the midst of crisis based on their experiences of participation and engagement in any kind of creative pastoral works

[1] Jabin J. Deguma, Melona C. Deguma, Jemina N. Tandag, Harlene Marie B. Acebes, Where is the Church in the Time of COVID-19 Pandemic: Prefering the Poor via G. Gutierrez' "Liberation" and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching in the Philippine Setting," *Journal of Social and Political Sciences* Vol. 3 No.2 (2020): 364.

in the emergency of Covid-19. Based on this observation, this article discusses characteristics of transformative leadership of the priests.

Priests as Leaders of the Community

In every community of the Catholics, priests will always be considered as leaders of the community. It will be, therefore, usefull to discuss shortly the topic of leadership here. Leadership is and will always be a complex and fascinating topic of discussion since our personal and social life are always tied up closely with leaders and leadership, whether political, social, religious, or ethnic leadership. At the beginning of its accademic research, leadership has been understood as a property unique to extraordinary individuals who take actions to change the course of history. Leadership comes out from great individuals who influence other people. Great leaders are born not made, because leaders are innate. Shortly speaking, in this perspective, leadership is an inheritance. Leaders are heroes and mythic extraordinary people. People call it "greatman" leadership theory. "The theory essential concept is that the leader is genetically able with higher qualities that distinguish him from his followers."[2] Later, people distinguished leaders from other people based on their characteristic such as weight, height, appearance, intelligence, knowledge, power, and creativity. In the course of time, concern on leadership shifted away from leadership qualities to leadership actions (Fleishman, 1953; Hemphill & Coons, 1957), from the characteristic of the leaders to their skills in applaying his leadership. Attention now are put on the leaders's skill to know their environment, the people under their leadership, their desire, and the working relationship among them. There appears a triad of leader, people, and circumstances that gave impact to an effective leadership. It has been clear that leadership qualities and leadership actions depend on the situation and circumstances. A leader may be a good leader in one situation, but he may fail to be a good leader in a different situation.

The focus on the importance of personal qualities which determine the effectiveness of leadership return around 1970-1980. Leadership is influenced so much by the characteristic and behaviors of the leaders described as charismatic or visionary and whose efects on followers are

[2] Mitra Madanchian, Norashikin Hussein, Fauziah Noordin, Hamed Taherdosst, "Leadership Theories; an Overview of Early Stages", in https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305323677_Leadership_Theories_an_Overview_of_Early_Stages, 26 July 2020, 10:40.

more profound (Erickson et al., 2007, 27). Leaders do not give only impacts on their followers but they gain their folowers's emotional attachment. Having their emotional attachment, loyalty and devotion, leaders will have more ability to transform their need, values, preferences and aspirations to a higher level of success. Leaders are charismatic persons who produce profound effects on their followers especially because people trust in them to bring new changes to a better situation. The trust of the people to them depends not on any rules, obligation, title, or honorable status of the leaders but on belief in their exemplary leadership's character.

In his article, Cam Caldwell *et al* explain that today's leaders are incapable of earning the trust of their employees or the support of society at large and are struggling to retain follower's trust.[3] The truth of this statement is found not only in the case of leadership on business, but in political and religious leadership as well. Leaders hardly get the trust of the people, especially those who continue to apply traditional models of leadership that are proved to be ineffective. People need a new model of leadership that is based on the strength of moral position and organizational skills to lead the organization to come to its goal. Today's leaders should convince the people about their character, their organanizational skills, and their ability to meet the expactation of the people. "Transformative leadership is an ethically based leadership model that integrates a commitment to values and outcomes by optimizing the long-term interests of stakeholders and society and honoring the moral duties owed by organizations to their stakeholders".[4] Only those who seriously live the highest standards of moral leadership will merit the trust and followership of others (Ciulla et al. 2005) and those who combine character and competence will earn credibility. Personal integrity is the most importance element of leadership.

People say that a leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way. Leadership, therefore, is basically the ability to decide what to do and to attract other people to carry out all the best to get the desirable outcomes. It is a skill to influence other people to achieve

[3] Cam Caldwell – Rolf D. Dixon – Larry A. Floyd – Joe Chaudoin – Jonathan Post – Gaynor Cheokas, "Transformative Leadership: Achieving Unparalleled Excellence," *Journal of Business Ethics* vol. 109. No.2 (2012): 175.

[4] Cam Caldwell et.al, "Transformative Leadership," 176.

certain goals.[5] Organizational skills, however, needs to be completed with values, ethics, moral, and personal integrity of the leaders so that leaders do not use manipulative strategy to obtain their personal purposes. A transformative leaders should be able to bring new, positive and challenging way to accomodate all resources to achieve their common goals. When leadership is first of all ability to influence other people, every leader should demonstrate his ability to change him/herself to walk through a new, creative and challenging way so that his/her personal integrity will be the first attraction for people to follow. The task of a leader is not only to help individual and organization prosper and simply survive, but to enable them to significantly increase the quality of their life. It is not enough to survive, but to produce more benefits for themselves and for others. It is not enough to be mediocre, but to exceed all expectations.

A Catholic priest was not born as a priest. Priesthood is not an inherited function. During his priestly formation, he should demonstrate his leadership capacity: love to the Church and to the people, disponibility to the mission, pastoral skills, personal maturity, moral attitude. In other words, priestly leadership is a product of dynamic formative process which will not come to an end with priestly ordination since leadership is a continuous practices to lead himself and other people to attain the mission of the Church. After his ordination, a priest is unceasingly called to improve his skill to know the environment, the people, their desire, and the working relationship among them. His leadership will be known from his ability to transform the dreams of the Church and the people into reality. Moreover, priest nay not be a single fighter. He should produce profound effects on the congregation to work together especially because people trust in him to bring new changes to a better situation.

In the world's life of this day, everything seems to be measured in reference to money and economic progress, leaving people who live in poverty and are unprepared for the pandemic. The problem of health coupled with the disoccupation, poverty, the chaning of the social norms in the society rose to a humanitarian crisis that should be resolve together. This situation challenges the priests to be present with their people to

[5] A. Rui Gomes, "Transformational Leadership: Theory, Research, and Application to Sport" in C. Mohiyeddini (ed)., *Contemporary Topics and Trends in the Psychology of Sports* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2013) 53-114. Available in https://www.researchgate.net/publication/310794991_Transformational_leadership_Theory_research_and_application_to_sports 23 May 2020, 09:24.

struggle for solidarity, justice, and love. The pandemic should be read as a call for the Churches to take action and join existing initiatives or new intitatives to stop the spread of Covid-19.[6]

Priests Amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic

Priests are formal leaders of ecclesial community. As mentioned before, their leadership first of all comes out from their priestly ordination and from the ecclesial assignment given by the bishops. It is curious to analyze whether they acquire standards of excellent leaders discussed by leadership theorists. It is clear that ordination is not a guarantee for a good leadership skill. Priests, however, are trainded during at least twelve years of their formation to be able to exercize priestly leadership among the people. Since they live under an ecclesial assignment, they cannot ignore what the Church needs and wants to do to save the souls since *cura animarum* is the purpose of any ecclesiastical mission. To carry out this mission, priests should know well their circumstances and put himself in a harmony with all people from all religious, political, social background to work hand in hand for the common good.

As the leaders of the community, priests should lead the people to face up to any situation in the community. The Covid-19 pandemic provides a test for their leadership quality. On March 22, 2020 the Arcbishop of Semarang issued a circular letter to the Catholics in the diocese on the suspension of liturgical and catechetical activities due to the wide spread of corona virus transmission. When the health situation became worse and critical, the diocese made a direction to stop any activities that gathered people in a crowd. With no liturgical and routine agenda, the priests were challenged to manage their pastoral works in a very different way. It is clear that not all priests were ready to this change of situation. One month after the suspension of the activities, a survey was held to gather information from the priests who work at the District of Sleman - Yogyakarta, or well-known as Rayon Slemania, about their pastoral activities to respond to this pandemic. The purpose of this research is to know the initiatives of the parish priests to creatively lead their community to engage in any effort to manifest their solidarity and responsibility to the suffering of others. At the time of the survey,

6 Lukasz Sulkowski, Grzegorz Ignatowski, "The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Organization the Religious Behaviour in Different Chrstian Denominations in Polang," *Religious,* 11(5), 254 (2020), doi:10.3390/rel11050254.

the priests in the District of Sleman has followed two days of spiritual direction before they renewed their priestly commitment in the Mass of Chrism. They were invited to reflect on Pope's Francis apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exultate*, especially on the call to the Church not to remain silent and fainthearted with lukewarm attitude, but to take neccessary actions to manifest her preferential option for those who are suffering.

The Covid-19 pandemic calls the priests as the pastors of the community to be creative in their pastoral. They cannot remain undisturbed with the programs listed in the annual program of the parish. It is a time when priests are called to reflect on the meaning of being a priest in the midst of the suffering of the people. Those who usually enjoy a secure life, with all facilities avvailable to them now must risk themselves on behalf of their community to guarantee the *cura personalis* of the believers. It is a time for the priests to go out from their parish house, from their routine to meet people in the streets, those who have lost their jobs, people who are contracted by the virus, and health officers who dedicate themselves to cure the sicks.

Most of the parish priests in the District of Sleman (61,11%) convinced that to be a priest in the midst of the anxiety and suffering of the people because of the Covid-19 pandemic means to be the one who make strategical policy of the parish to urge the Catholics to engage themselves in a solidarity and responsibility to the suffering of other people. Twenty seven percent of the priests want to actualize the pastoral spirit of the Arcbishop to find out and to save the lost ones and 11,11% want to obey the direction from the Diocese. Two important informations shoul be noted. Most of the priests did not take a new or creative initiative to directly respond to the emergency. It means that they still want to keep the ordinary activities of the parish as their activities in the time of emergency. Online mass becomes the favourite activity carried out by the priests to serve the faithfull. What they call "strategical policy of the parish" is not clearly manifested in their pastoral choices. It is surprising that no priest at the time of the survey choose to engage themselves in a join colaboration with wider non-ecclesial circumstances to take necessary actions in this pandemic. It means that the priests still hold an inward point of view of being a priest in the midst of the pandemic. Other posibility is that this choice was not yet so urgent to do at that time.

Some pastoral choices has been carried out by the priests in their collaboration with the community. The priests led the parishioners to provide food for the affected families (61%), and to collect donation (22%). Food provision was considered the most urgent need at the initial phase of the emergency since many people lost their job and earnings so that they could not provide food for themselves. The workers who belong to informal sectors were tragically affected by the transmission of the virus. The families faced difficulties to handle their own live cost so that concern to their extended families diminished. Elder people had no more sufficient sustenance from their children. It is reasonable that the priests opted to provide enough food for the families. To facilitate the provision of food, donation should be collected. It is actually easy for the priests to move the generosity of the parishioners since before the priests began the collection of donation and food provision, parishioners had actively found their way to share the generosity to the families around them. They need only the way to share their generosity. The task of the priests is to make a way for this generosity, to facilitate the collection and the distribution of the donation, and finally to account for the use of the donation. A priest should use his leadership capacity to influence the parishioners. This influence, however, should be based on morally and spiritually firm motivation.

The parish priests of St. Alphonsus – Nandan, for example, chose to motivate the parishioners to be a Catholic Church that manifests her solidarity and responsibility to the suffering of other people. The motto is that the Church should not leave anyone alone without any help. The initiative came up with a reflection on how the Church should exist in this pandemic era. The call of Pope Francis to go out to the street, to leave away the comfort zone to reach those in need urged the parish to make a small step of solidarity and responsibility. With some parishioners, the priests in the parish organized a task force called "Peduli Kasih Covid-19 St. Alphonsus Nandan". It's mission is to back up the Socio-economic Developing Team of the Parish to provide food for the affected families, to find financial aid and economic assistance for the families. The priority was given to the Catholic families, but it in fact, it was expanded to non Catholic families as well. The "Peduli Kasih" task force should find the way to provide food for the families at least for three months (April to June 2020). This choice actually needs big fund that is not part of the parish's budget of this year, but no one was worried about it. The only hope is to leave no one hungry.

When the situation getting worse, a new form of generosity arouse. Parishioners prepared ready food for those who need it. On Mondays and Thursdays they bring the food to the street and shared the food to anyone. At the beginning, it was scheduled only on Mondays, but the generousity of the people to prepare food has encouraged the tas force to offer ready food also on Thursdays. Everyone with no discrimination could ask for this food. This program really opened a new opportunity to work together with the inhabitants of the area, especially the youth. It is a manifestation of a Church that meets other people of other religion, other socio-cultural background not in the Churchyard, but on the street, tha public area. It is not a new way of being a Church at all, but a way that need to be lived seriously if the Church wants to have meaningful and significant presence in the society. The Church must considers herself part of the society. She is not an isolate body of extraterrestrial creature. The presence of the Church shoud be felt by anyone, especially those who are poor and in need.

Informal sector is the most affected by the pandemic. Micro bussiness of the families are forced to stop their activities. Many of them who handle small foodstore had no more buyers because social and physical distancing prevented people to go out to by food. This micro bussineses need to be helped to gain market in the period of recovery. For this reason, the task force helped them to make a catalogue of micro bussnisses of the parishioners so that they can promote their products and people may make order via cellphone. During the recovery, the parish will use the pedestrian track in the courtyard of the Church for them to be a Sunday Market where parishioners may have a place to sell their goods.

Other good initiative to do is planting vegetables in the houseyard. One of the strength of a society is its ability to provide food for themselves. It is impossible to invite parishioners to plant rice or corn, but it is a realistic invitation to plant vegetables for their own family. It is not only about planting vegetables, but also being responsible to the great gift of earth, managing the garbage of the families, separating organic, recyclable, and unrecyclable. Families are trained to process organic waste to be fertilizer, to recycle the thing they used to throw away, and to put the unrecyclable goods in its proper place so that it doesn't harm the soil. It is a concret way to actualize the exhortations of Pope Francis in Laudato Si' to love the mother earth to be a house for all creatures. A priest would not be able to invite people to do so unless he himself goes to the yard to plough the soil and begins to plan vegetables. It means that

a priest must be the first person to make the first step so that his choice may become a good testimony to the people.

In these activities, the presence of the priests as facilitator and motivator is undoubtedly needed. They facilitate the parish and the parishoners to take action to respond to the emergency without a complicated procedure in the process of decision making. Amidst an emergency, procedure becomes less important while creativity and flexibility are undoubtedly needed. Those who want to hold firmly the listed programs will loose their sensibility to the crisis. They will need too much time to discussion, while those who suffer need immediate helps rather than words. As the leaders of the parish, priests are called to have the courage to manage creative initiatives and actions which surely ask for greater works and budget. They must transform themselves from the servant of liturgy to the servant of humanity.

Priests: Transformative Leaders

It is undeniable that for the priests, the Covid-19 pandemic has created an extremely significant impact on being a priest as the leader of the community who must make himself take the first step of engagement in the solidarity and responsibility to the suffering one. Priests are called to find new and creative ways to lead the community. They must effectively promote the people to give their hand to those who need their presence, help, financial assistance, food supply, etc. Effectiveness of leadership swings around the capability and the character of the leaders.[7] Ineffective leadership of the priest will make the Church directionless and under-fed. As a shepherd, a priest tends, feeds, and guards the flocks. The picture of shepherd is rooted in the Old Testament's view on God as the Shepherd of Israel (Psalm 23, Is 40:10-11, Ez 34:1, Jer 23:1). Jesus used this picture to say about himself as a good shepherd who knew his sheep and laid down his life for them (Jn 10:7-18). Jesus, then, gave a commission to Peter to feed his sheep (Jn 21:1). In the midst of pandemic, the presence of a shepherd who tends the flock is needed. Unfortunately, he cannot lead the community to a safe place, but to meet the risk of loving other people and serving them as Jesus the Good Shepherd did. A priest first of all makes himself ready to stand in the front line and to give his life to the flock.

[7] K. Thomas Rosane, "Leadership for the Church: The Shepherd Model," *HTS Theologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 70(1), Art. #2045, 6 pages. http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2045

Priests who are not transformative are finished priests. They are stuck in tradition and fail to cope with any changes in the Church and society. When Jesus said, "By their fruits you will know them," it is easily understood that only those who bear good fruits will be known as transformative priests. They should not hold firm their high status, their title, or their social position. Transformative priests should have the spiritual and practical wisdom necessary to change individuals, congregations, and communities.[8] They will make the community different from other with their virtues and good fruits. Do they abdicate their responsibility on the most critical issues of the time? Do they repond to the issue of hunger, disoccupation, deseases, economical loos of the families?

Since transformative leadership is, at its heart, a participatory process of creative collaboration and transformation for mutual benefit,[9] priests cannot work alone, but must be in collaboration and cooperation with other priests, with the parishioners and all people from different religions and cultures. It is clear from the experience during the pandemic that priests are not heroes. In some cases, priests are too late to act while the parishioners have found their creative ways to express their solidarity and responsibility. The task of the priests is to put them together in a process of creative collaboration for greater common good. The most important element of transformative leaders is the ability to move more people to work together to transform the families, the society, the church, and the world where they are. It is not a matter of typically single fighter leader. It is not a matter on inheritance, status, higher position since everyone can be a transformative leader. Priests are, certainly, have been prepared during their formation in the Seminary to be able to put people togather in an active collaboration. They become bridges that relate one person to another. There is no need to make a great and heroic actions to become a transformative leader. It needs small action but real. Saint Theresia said we must do small thing with great love.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought out anxieties, anger, and dispair in the society. Transformative priests works to engage themselves in a transformative process with all people to attain grater benefit since the

[8] Jeffery L. Tribble, *Transformative Pastoral Leadership in the Black Church*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), xvi.

[9] Alfonso Montuori – Gabriel Donelly, (2018). "Transformative leadership". 10.1007/978-3-319-29587-9_59-1 ·

pandemic will not lead humanity to downfall. Transformative priests will help people to deeply understand their reality of suffering and to encourage them that joining hand to hand, they would find new future and transformed live. They are not led by anxieties, anger, or dispair, but by hope, courage, and conviction that they are well prepared to engage themselves in any process that transforms the community and society to a better future. Transformative leadership begins with an inner transformation of the leader (here, priests) who then combine their inner transformation with the force of social transformation in the community. A transformative priest takes his first step of transformation and engages himself in the hope, conviction, participation of other people in solving common problems. They choose to stand up with those who suffer, to take any risks for their participation with the conviction that small but real action could make a difference and contribute to change the world. His tasks is to engage himself and other people to a networked culture of collaboration to bring about better future of the community.

Conclusion

This Covid-19 pandemic is to hard and difficult to confront. Collaboration and networking are needed. The priests should be capable to work together in a collaborative process, to engage more lay people in every moment, to think globally and act locally. Called to bring Christ to the world, priests have to adapted their ministries to bring Christ to everyone, especially to serve those who suffered and in great need because of the crisis. They are witnessing a fruitfull life and ministry in the foostep of Jesus who gave himself totally for his love to his people. The society and the Church community will no longer be the same after the pandemic is over so priests need to look ahead and to ready to make new plan and effort to make the Church present as the sacrament of salvation for all people. Priests are called "to sell their desks" because their job would be out in the streets to join hand in hand with people from all religious, political, and cultural background to bring common good to all.

Solidarity is an integral part of the socio-spiritual responsibility of the priests. The priests could not leave the most vunerable members of the society to be humiliated and marginalized in the midst of this pandemic. Priests are called to take the poor into account in their decision making on what should be carried out. In other world, it is a spiritual call to see the reality from the eyes of the poor who suffer from this crisis.

Scriptures show that God has always had a loving preference to the poor as their protector who stands in the defense of those people who are in greatly need. God's preference is not a passive love since God intervenes in the course of history to liberate the poor.[10] God commits himself to the poor. This spirituality is of course the spirituality that should permeates the works of the priests in this pandemic. No priest is hindered from commiting themselves with the vulnerable members of the community. Jesus illustrates himself as a good shepherd who leave the save ninty nine sheep to go in search for one lost sheep. He is the true shepherd who give himself to the sheep in their defence and protection. Priest should voice the cry of the suffering people without discrimination. For the priests, this pandemic constitutes a good opportunity to serve the Church and the people in a more creative manner; to serve without counting the cost and to give without expecting for a reward.[11]

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[10] Jabin J. Deguma, *et all*., "Where is the Church in the Time of COVID-19 Pandemic?", 365.

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