From Social Friendship to Political Charity: Community Pantries in the Spirit of Fratelli Tutti

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Recommended Citation

DOI: https://doi.org/10.59588/2350-8329.1474
Available at: https://animorepository.dlsu.edu.ph/apssr/vol22/iss4/5

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When Pope Francis was composing his third social encyclical Fratelli Tutti, the COVID-19 global outbreak overtook him. Italy became one of the epicenters of the pandemic outbreak two months after the release of Fratelli Tutti (Winfield, 2020). The Pope poignantly admitted that the pandemic has exposed “our false securities” (Pope Francis, 2020, Fratelli Tutti, No. 7, hereto referred as FT). He pointed out the glaring failure of technology-driven globalism: “For all our hyper-connectivity, we witnessed a fragmentation that made it more difficult to resolve problems that affect us all” (Pope Francis, 2020 FT No. 7). The encyclical later laments the failure of the market so dear to neoliberal economists and technocrats. The Pope was emphatic in the encyclical that the “marketplace, by itself, cannot resolve every problem, however much we are asked to believe this dogma of neoliberal faith. Whatever the challenge, this impoverished and repetitive school of thought always offers the same recipes” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 168). He denounced the idolatry of the market:

…there were those who would have had us believe that freedom of the market was sufficient to keep everything secure. Yet the brutal and unforeseen blow of this uncontrolled pandemic forced us to recover our concern for human beings, for everyone, rather than for the benefit of a few. (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 33)
The culture of the market causes a “desensitized human conscience” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 275). The Pope traced this problem to a “distancing from religious values and the prevailing individualism accompanied by materialistic philosophies that deify the human person and introduce worldly and material values in place of supreme and transcendental principles” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 275). The burgeoning of community pantries (CPs) during the uninterrupted lockdown in the Philippines is a testament to the fact that the logic of the market can be broken. As Pope Francis wrote in his Letter to Popular Movements on April 12, 2020: “Our civilization – so competitive, so individualistic, with its frenetic rhythms of production and consumption, its extravagant luxuries, its disproportionate profits for just a few – needs to downshift, take stock, and renew itself” (Pope Francis, 2020, p. 25).

This paper, using Fratelli Tutti as a hermeneutic lens, will try to argue that CPs are expressions of “social charity” and can be transformed into “political charity” that can provide an alternative to the failed promises of neoliberal ethos. This paper is cognizant that many organizers of CPs are remotely aware of the teachings of the Fratelli Tutti and the social teachings of the Catholic Church. Some of them may even be critical of the way the Church has preached “charity” as a solution to social injustice (Patricia Non, for example, qualifies the effectiveness of immediate dole-outs). However, it will be regrettable if sociologists cannot use Fratelli as their fore-understanding in looking at the social relevance of the Church in this time of the pandemic. Interestingly, many Christians and Church organizations and parishes already implemented mutual aid even before the pandemic (Lopez, 2020). And it would be equally unfortunate if organizers of community pantries will not learn from the teachings of Pope Francis and the social teachings of the Church. The present analysis of community pantries being offered in this paper is not a way to Christianize and claim CPs for the Church. It has no intention to baptize the organizers of CPs as “anonymous Christians” along the lines of German theologian Karl Rahner (1954/1974). But it is also unfortunate if mutual non-encounter between the organizers of CPs and Pope Francis continues to exist. Rather than using a parallax view of switching perspectives to view community pantries, as Zizek (2009) might suggest, this paper will try to interpret the CPs from the lens of the social and political vision of Pope Francis. In doing so, this present paper hopes to encourage CP organizers and sociologists of religion to learn from the current social teachings of the Church in order to find ethical guidance in the age of anomic, not only created by the global COVID-19 pandemic but by the breakdown of the neoliberal economic system itself. Like the “critical tradition” in sociology, the social teachings of the Church veer away from, while not completely jettisoning, the individualistic reading of the Good Samaritan. Sociologists of religion have much to learn from the profound philosophical, theological, and sociological resources of the Church when it comes to envisioning a more human future society and global system.

I am a sociologist by profession who is interested in religion. But I am not just a sociologist interested in religion, but also someone who was raised as a Catholic. This paper, therefore, hopefully will stimulate dialogue and mutual learning, advocated by Pope Francis in his recent encyclical, from both the professional sociologists interested in religion and social change and those theologians and students of religion who want to study the continuing relevance of religion in the post-pandemic world. It is high time to put the Church and religion at the very heart of the struggle for social justice. As Pope Francis reminded us, “the Church, while respecting the autonomy of political life, does not restrict her mission to the private sphere. On the contrary, “she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines” in the building of a better world, or fail to “reawaken the spiritual energy” that can contribute to the betterment of society” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 276). It is, therefore, beneficial for sociologists of religion and those who study church and society to explore how the Church can contribute to building a better future in the “new normal.”

**Militaristic Lockdown and the Immiseration of the Poor**

Following the outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), which started in Wuhan, Hubei, China, the Philippine government confirmed the country’s first case of the disease on January 30, 2020, when the virus was detected in a Chinese national who traveled from Wuhan, China and Hong Kong. As cases steadily increased, on March 8, 2020, President Rodrigo Duterte
signed Proclamation 922, placing the entire Philippines under a state of public health emergency because of the COVID-19 threat that is looming in the nation.

The first community quarantine, as it is locally called, was imposed on the island of Luzon on March 16, 2020, when 53.3 million people—including the capital’s 12.8 million residents—were ordered to stay at home. This was the beginning of the world’s longest lockdown.

A year later, on March 22, after daily cases rose up to 8,000, the government enforced a stricter two-week General Community Quarantine (GCQ) for National Capital Region Plus, which included Metro Manila, Rizal, Bulacan, Cavite, and Laguna (Ranada & Tomacruz, 2021). However, despite the stricter measures, cases continued to increase, reaching up to 15,000 cases — the highest single-day tally during this time (Buan, 2021). This forced the government to change the modified GCQ to the one-week strictest Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) (Rappler, 2021) on March 29, and later extended for another week (“ECQ extended in Metro Manila,” 2021). Because of the prolonged lockdown measures, a lot of businesses and livelihoods were distressed; many individuals and families were struggling to cope with the fear of the virus and the loss of income.

The Philippine Statistics Authority announced that the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) shrank by 4.2% in the first quarter of 2021. Agriculture fell by 1.2%, whereas services and industry contracted by 4.4% and 4.7%, respectively (Rivas, 2021a).

The Philippines’ unemployment rate rose to 8.7% in April 2021, as the country resorted to lockdowns after failing to lower COVID-19 cases, latest figures from the Philippine Statistics Authority showed on Tuesday, June 8, 2021. This translates to 4.14 million Filipinos without jobs amid the worst health and economic crisis in recent history (Rivas, 2021b).

Prior to the second lockdown, a study by the Asian Development Bank Institute predicted that if they lost their income amid the coronavirus pandemic, around half of Filipino households would have enough resources to cover necessary expenses for only up to two weeks (Rivas, 2021b).

Toward the end of 2020, nearly a quarter of Filipinos were living in poverty, surviving on about $3 a day, according to the World Bank (Wright and Coles, 2021). A Social Weather Station (SWS) hunger survey in September 2020 showed that 30.7% of Filipino families experienced hunger, and 8.7% suffered severe hunger—the highest levels recorded in 20 years (Wright & Coles, 2021). This finding was validated by the Department of Science and Technology’s Food and Nutrition Research Institute’s recent survey showing that hunger has been experienced by more than 50% of Filipinos (Adriano, 2021).

Amidst this immiseration of the poor, the lockdown implemented by the government was geared towards a punitive and militaristic solution. According to Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), Filipinos arrested, detained, or fined one year since the lockdown began on March 15 were already at 100,000 as of September 2020 (See, 2021). The data from the PNP showed that from March 17 to November 14, 2020, there were 538,577 people “accosted” for quarantine violations, such as disobedience and curfew violations. Of these, 185,471 were given a warning, and 218,808 were fined. Most of these violators were poor and unemployed, who were cramped up in jails, fined, and subjected to harsh punishments.

Meanwhile, killings due to Duterte’s drug war continued unabated. Human Rights Watch analyzed the government’s statistics and found 155 persons were killed in four months from the beginning of the lockdown. Before the COVID-19 crisis, police killed 103 persons from December 2019 to March 2020 (Conde, 2020).

However, more gruesome expressions of the culture of death are still to come. On Labor Day in 2020, 10 volunteers for a feeding program — seven of whom are jeepney drivers who lost their livelihood due to the lockdown — were arrested and slapped with complaints of violation of RA 11332 otherwise known as “Mandatory Reporting of Notifiable Diseases and Health Events of Public Health Concern Act, disobedience under Art. 151 or RPC, and Batas Pambansa 880 or the Public Assembly Act. A month later, police arrested 20 participants in a Pride March protest against the anti-terrorism bill for the same complaints (Patag, 2021).

Other than suspected poor drug users, the Leftist activists and human rights defenders were key targets of physical and online attacks. The March 7, 2021, “Bloody Sunday” was a big day of loss for activists in the Philippines. Prior to the massacre, the police and military served a total of 24 search warrants in the Calabarzon region (Cavite, Batangas, Laguna, and Rizal), leading to nine deaths and six arrests (Talabong, 2021).
Overall, the world’s longest lockdown is violative of the civil liberties of the people, including the right to life, whereas poverty and hunger proved as deadly as the COVID-19 virus.

Mutual Aid in Time of Failed Fascist Government

The resulting economic hardships that the poor endured during the pandemic saw the spontaneous sprouting of community pantries. Ana Patricia Non, a furniture business owner and a resident of Quezon City, was the first to set up a community pantry along Maginhawa Street on April 14, 2021. Non’s community pantry was just a small bamboo cart containing essentials, such as fresh vegetables, rice, canned goods, alcohol, and sanitizer, where people in the area either got what they needed or donated what they could. The famous catchphrase of the pantry is written on a small cardboard: *Magbigay ayon sa kakayahan, kumuha ayon sa pangangailangan* [“give what you can, take only as you need”]. Patricia Non was not foreign to the economic difficulties that ordinary people experienced during the prolonged lockdowns. She said she just wanted to help but also admitted that what pushed her to do this was the government’s insufficient response to the pandemic (Grana, 2021). She said in an interview, “Alam kong may ginagawa ang government, pero sa tingin ko, kulang ito, kasi hindi naman pipila ang tao nang mahaba kung sapat na iyong nakukuha nila” [I know the government is doing something, but I don’t think it is enough. If people were getting enough from the government, they won’t be waiting in long lines. English translation here] (De Leon, 2021).

“I Googled ‘community pantry’ and I saw the phrase ‘give what you can, take what you need’” (Untivero, 2021, para. 2). The slogan has since gone viral online, translated to Filipino (Tagalog) as *magbigay ayon sa kakayahan, kumuha ayon sa pangangailangan*. Non explained, “My sister based in Palawan translated it for me. The next day, I placed a bamboo cart with surplus goods outside and put up the sign—hoping to help anyone” (Untivero, 2021, para. 4).

On April 17, four days after the establishment of the first pantry, various other make-shift carts containing groceries and essential goods popped up across the country (Dionisio et al., 2021). They popped up spontaneously along roads and neighborhoods that carried the slogan “*Magbigay ayon sa kakayahan, kumuha ayon sa pangangailangan*.” A total of 44 community pantries from Pangasinan, in the north, up to Davao and Iligan, in the south, were set up in the first four days across the country. A crowdsourced digital map, “Saan May Community Pantry?” [Where Are the Community Pantries?], created by various mapmakers and mapping advocate organizations, was even set up to help others locate community pantries where they could donate (Nolasco, 2021). Most of the organizers were private enterprises, civic organizations, youth groups, activist groups, church organizations, and concerned citizens who helped in setting up the pantries and gathering donations and resources inside one of the world’s longest lockdowns and worst pandemic response (See, 2021).

![Figure 1. The Initial Mapping of Community Pantries in April 2021 (Nolasco, 2021)](image-url)
Four days after the map was put up online, the project had already mapped out the locations of 358 community pantries from as far north as Ballesteros town in Cagayan province to as far south as Zamboanga City (Cabaza, 2021). “In less than a week, the pantry served around 3,000 individuals. Ordinary folks have gone to Maginhawa, a street famous for its holes-in-the-wall, to help sustain the cart.” (Valenzuela, 2021, para. 4).

Charity or Disguised Communism? Politicization of CPs by Red-Tagging

At the height of the popularity of the CPs, the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF ELCAC) publicly accused the organizers of the CPs as supporters of the legally tagged “terrorist” organization Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). The NTF-ELCAC, established by President Rodrigo Duterte on December 4, 2020, is tasked to quell the communist insurgency in the country and has since been notorious for “red tagging”—labeling people as “terrorist” communist rebels, many of whom often end up dead. With the expansion of community pantries nationwide, NTF ELCAC spokesperson General Antonio Parlade accused Patricia Non of deceiving people by comparing her to the Old Testament character Eve: “Same with Satan. Satan gave Eve an apple. That’s where it all started” (Wong, 2021, para. 5).

The task force, together with the police, even admitted they were monitoring the CPs because they were suspected of recruiting people to overthrow the government (Wong, 2021). These intimidations and public vilification of CP organizers forced some CPs to close down temporarily, but others closed permanently, fearing security threats from the police and military (Gallardo, 2021). Yet, this did not deter the operations of CPs. From a single bamboo cart outside her house, 6,700 other community pantries were established across the Philippines (Untivero, 2021).

Undoubtedly, CPs are a response to economic difficulties the poor faced during the lockdown. The Philippine government provided up to PHP8,000 (US$167) in 2020 and PHP 4,000 ($83) in 2021 for each of the country’s 18 million low-income families. But this support is not enough for daily essentials and has left many Filipinos feeling they have to fend for themselves (Wong, 2021).

The organizers of CPs may not be discursively conscious of the Christian spirit that animates their practices. But CPs are clear expressions of charity defined in its broadest Christian sense. Filipinos have adopted these values from hundreds of years of Christian evangelization. As Pope Francis pointed out, “Recognizing that all people are our brothers and sisters, and seeking forms of social friendship that include everyone,” charity “demands a decisive commitment to devising effective means to this end” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 180). But the Pope appealed to a more effective means of doing charity, that is, political charity where “individuals can help others in need, when they join together in initiating social processes of fraternity and justice for all” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 180). CPs, of course, are not politically organized, although they can be oriented to “political charity.” For “charity finds expression not only in close and intimate relationships but also in “macarelationships: social, economic and political” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 181).

The wellspring of CPs is social charity: “Social charity makes us love the common good”, it makes us effectively seek the good of all people, considered not only as individuals or private persons, but also in the social dimension that unites them” (Pope Francis, 2020 FT No. 182). To engage in CPs is to transcend our individualistic mindset. They are means to heat fractured community relations caused by the pursuit of one’s self-interests without regard for the common good.

From Charity to Social Solidarity

The commodities produced under capitalism for exchange are transformed by CPs into a common good that is shared by all. This communalism undermines the growing fragmentation in the community enforced violently by the neoliberal ethos of narcissism, consumerism, and rugged individualism. Pope Francis, who defines solidarity “as a moral virtue and social attitude born of personal conversion” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 114), equated it with “service” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 115). Service is “caring for
vulnerability, for the vulnerable members of our families, our society, our people” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 115). The Pope even came close to Marxist materialism by equating solidarity not with encounter or being inspired by ideas and ideologies but by being touched by the people’s “faces,” touching their “flesh,” “senses their closeness,” and even to the point of experiencing the suffering of these vulnerable individuals in the process of helping them (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 115). But it is not just a sporadic personal exercise of service. Solidarity “also means combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labour rights” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 116). This is accomplished most effectively by social movements that seek to transform social institutions and global relations (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 116). Thus, “real and lasting peace will only be possible “on the basis of a global ethic of solidarity and cooperation in the service of a future shaped by interdependence and shared responsibility in the whole human family’” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 127). This implies forging a broader long-term vision to change our current situation.

The Value of Political Charity

Pope Francis highlighted the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) in his encyclical. Pope Francis explained the supreme lesson of the parable:

Love does not care if a brother or sister in need comes from one place or another. For “love shatters the chains that keep us isolated and separate; in their place, it builds bridges. Love enables us to create one great family, where all of us can feel at home… Love exudes compassion and dignity. (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 62)

Prior to the pandemic, globalism has already destroyed our sense of solidarity. The pandemic has exacerbated the wastefulness and indifference in a “throwaway society.” In this throwaway society, “the sight of a person who is suffering disturbs us. It makes us uneasy, since we have no time to waste on other people’s problems. These are symptoms of an unhealthy society. A society that seeks prosperity but turns its back on suffering” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 65). Byul-Chun Han (2017), a contemporary Korean philosopher, observed the same, “A real feeling of freedom occurs only in a fruitful relationship – when being with others brings happiness. But today’s neoliberal regime leads to utter isolation; as such, it does not really free us at all” (p. 10).

CPs institutionalize the practice of being a good Samaritan. It does not discriminate against whoever wants to get what they need in the pantry. The institutionalization of the spirit of being a good Samaritan realizes the value of the actions of the Good Samaritan: “the existence of each and every individual is deeply tied to that of others: life is not simply time that passes; life is a time for interactions” (Pope Francis 2020, FT No. 26). Being a good Samaritan is incompatible with the neoliberal ethos of me-first, the obsession with the mantra that “if I fail, it’s my problem,” thereby exonerating the government and the community from their responsibilities. Community pantries are against the neoliberal ethics of “responsibilization” or reducing all my failings and successes to my own self-doings. The resulting failures are described by Carl Ratner (2019) as “self-blame” that “preserves the socially destructive neoliberal political economy reaction to political economic oppression” (p. 155).

In this sense, charity radically raptures the commodification of our everyday life during the pandemic. Charity means, “those who are loved are ‘dear’ to me; ‘they are considered of great value’” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 93).

The Limits of Charity, or Limited Charity?

When asked whether CPs are solutions to poverty, Patricia Non, the founder of the first CP in Maginhawa Street, explained:

Yung community pantry ay umaasa lang sa mga donasyon, hindi po talaga siya sagot sa hunger at poverty. Kung baga, additional lang siya dapat. Tingin ko po maso-solve siya kung ma-address ng government na taasan ang budget for food at ayuda, lalo na po ang taas ng unemployment and poverty rate sa Pilipinas [Community pantry relies on donations, so it is not the answer to hunger and poverty. I
think these problems will be solved if only the government will increase its economic assistance to our people specially now that we have high unemployment rate). (Rojas, 2021, para. 6)

Non’s statement echoes the teachings of the Catholic Church on charity. For Pope Francis, “social charity” must be based on truth. “Without truth, emotion lacks relational and social content. Charity’s openness to truth thus protects it from “a fideism that deprives it of its human and universal breadth” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 184). In short, any attempt to make social charity effective must be grounded in concrete social analysis and truth based on faith. It has to respect the autonomy and contributions of the social sciences. Good intentions and emotions are not enough. They must be accompanied by a systematic diagnosis of the situation and solutions that will address these concrete social problems (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 185). In this sense, charity goes beyond the spontaneous desire to help others. It becomes a form of “commanded love” that “moves people to create more sound institutions, more just regulations, more supportive structures” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 186).

Unfortunately, the Left had always been wary and critical of any charitable organizations. Like Paolo Freire (2000), they see mutual aid as a form of false generosity that leaves class inequality intact. To veer away from such charitable work, some Leftist organizers advocate solidarity, not cheap charity: “The goal of mutual aid is to change relationships between people…and to take care of one another as an act of solidarity and of commitment to interdependence” (Hudson, 2020, p. 176).

In the Condition of the Working Class in England, originally published in 1845, Engels (1844/1987) wrote a scathing rebuke of charity as practiced by Christian bourgeoisie:

There you have it! The English bourgeoisie is charitable out of self-interest; it gives nothing outright, but regards its gifts as a business matter, makes a bargain with the poor, saying: “If I spend this much upon benevolent institutions, I thereby purchase the right not to be troubled any further, and you are bound thereby to stay in your dusky holes and not to irritate my tender nerves by exposing your misery. (p. 446)

Engels accused Christians of hypocrisy in the practice of charity by degrading the status of the poor further by forcing them to give up their dignity by asking for assistance:

Charity which degrades him who gives more than him who takes; charity which treads the downtrodden still deeper in the dust, which demands that the degraded, the pariah cast out by society, shall first surrender the last that remains to him, his very claim to manhood, shall first beg for mercy before your mercy deigns to press, in the shape of an alms, the brand of degradation upon his brow. (Engels, 1987, p. 445)

Pope Francis and the entire tradition of the social teachings of the Church treat charity as “part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being” (Pope Benedict, 2005, No. 25). Like his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis grounded the entire doctrine of the Catholic Church on charity: “Every commitment inspired by the Church’s social doctrine is ‘derived from charity, which according to the teaching of Jesus is the synthesis of the entire Law’” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 181). However, the Pope rescued charity from “mere sentiment” by arguing, instead, “that it is the best means of discovering effective paths of development for everyone” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 184). The Pope even acknowledged that charity “is easily dismissed as irrelevant for interpreting and giving direction to moral responsibility” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 184). However, if charity is guided by truth, that is, by the use of correct social scientific analysis to analyze social problems, it can be “as much more than personal feeling,” and consequently need not “fall prey to contingent subjective emotions and opinions” (FT No. 184). This is an effective charity—guided by truth from social sciences and the Christian tradition. From this discussion, two types of charity emerge – “elicited charity” or charity borne out of an individual’s desire to help others, and that of “commanded love” or “political charity” that is expressed in those acts of charity that spur people to create more sound institutions, more just regulations, more supportive structures” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 47).

Leftists may approve of the second form but will spurn the first expression. But Pope Francis
himself rejected the Pharisaical charity criticized by Engels:

It makes us realize that “the scandal of poverty cannot be addressed by promoting strategies of containment that only tranquilize the poor and render them tame and inoffensive. How sad it is when we find, behind allegedly altruistic works, the other being reduced to passivity.” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 187)

Charity, to be effective, must be guided by “veritas” or truth so it can dismantle obstacles in the pursuit of liberating the poor from the shackles of poverty and dependence. Pope Francis moved (without repudiating) from spontaneous or elicited charity towards a more politicized form of charity informed by science and Christian tradition. Charity is not antithetical to the pursuit of social justice. Far from it, “initiating social processes of fraternity and justice for all” means “working for a social and political order whose soul is social charity” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 180). Or, in the words of the encyclical Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth) of Pope Benedict XVI (2009), “Not only is justice not extraneous to charity, not only is it not an alternative or parallel path to charity: justice is inseparable from charity” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 6).

Building a Community of Brothers and Sisters

Pope Francis considered the market as antithetical to community solidarity: “If a society is governed primarily by the criteria of market freedom and efficiency, there is no place for such persons, and fraternity will remain just another vague ideal” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 109). In the same vein, Carl Ratner (2019) substantiated the Pope’s critique of the market:

Ratner (2019) further argued, “When neoliberal capitalism successfully keeps people in their place, the people blame themselves—individually and collectively—for their stagnation or decline” (p. 152). The organizers of the CPs “understood that no one is saved alone” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 54). And in this sense, they showed that “the existence of each and every individual is deeply tied to that of others: life is not simply time that passes; life is a time for interactions” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 66). This is captured by the Filipino term “bayanihan” [community cooperation]. Bayanihan is shown in situations wherein individuals disregard social status to lend their helping hands to a stranger or a group of people in need. Traditionally, this is exemplified by people coming together to physically transfer the house of their neighbor to another place (Franco, 2021).

In CPs, people come together to exercise kindness and “political tenderness.” In the midst of the violence of neoliberal individualism, “miraculously, a kind person appears and is willing to set everything else aside in order to show interest, to give the gift of a smile, to speak a word of encouragement, to listen amid general indifference. If we make a daily effort to do exactly this, we can create a healthy social atmosphere in which misunderstandings can be overcome and conflict forestalled.” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 224). And charity does not depend on resources. It is based primarily on the willingness to serve. So, when asked how long CPs can sustain themselves, Patricia Non replied, “I’m not too worried though, because the point of the pantry is to give what you can, and if this is all we can manage, for now, that’s okay” (Untivero, 2021, para. 6).

Building a Post-Pandemic Society

The critical pedagogue Henry Giroux (2021) prognosticated about the post-pandemic world:

As the pandemic crisis recedes, we will have to choose between a society that addresses human needs or one in which a survival-of-the fittest-ethos and war-of-all against-all becomes the only organizing principle of society. It is time for new visions, public transcripts and pedagogical narratives to emerge about the meaning of politics, solidarity, mass resistance and democracy itself. (p. 25)
This is exactly what the Pope is proposing in Fratelli. To avoid reducing charity to mere spontaneous acts of the individual, the Pope advocated that people “join together in initiating social processes of fraternity and justice for all” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 180). Rather than an individualistic approach, these individuals “enter the field of charity at its most vast, namely political charity.” This entails working for a social and political order whose soul is social charity.” In this sense, Christians are enjoined to realize that politics is “a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 180). Christians must go out into the world. In an interview, Pope Francis warned Catholics about being closed Church:

When the Church is closed, she falls sick, she falls sick. Think of a room that has been closed for a year. When you go into it there is a smell of damp, many things are wrong with it. A Church closed in on herself is the same, a sick Church. The Church must step outside herself. To go where? To the outskirts of existence, whatever they may be, but she must step out. Jesus tells us: “Go into all the world! Go! Preach! Bear witness to the Gospel!” (Tornealli & Galeazzi, 2015/2015, p. 17)

If we are to build a post-pandemic society free from the clutches of neoliberal ethos, we have no other choice than to create its foundations now in social friendship, fraternity, tenderness, and social solidarity. Such post-pandemic society is expressed by Zygmunt Bauman’s (2001) people’s longing to be safe in an unsecured world:

If there is to be a community in the world of the individuals, it can only be (and it needs to be) a community woven together from sharing and mutual care; a community of concern and responsibility for the equal right to be human and the equal ability to act on that right. (pp. 149–150)

And we cannot build this coming community alone in isolation. We have to act together to replace the neoliberal worldview towards the recovery of human dignity and universal fraternity. As Pope Benedict declared, “Love thus needs to be organized if it is to be an ordered service to the community” (Pope Benedict, 2005, No. 20). And that is the vocation proper to Christian participation in politics.

**From Mutual Aid to Self-Valorization**

Obviously, the proliferation of CPs nationwide was not enough to transform Philippine society during the pandemic. But they contribute to challenging the prevailing hegemonic neoliberal values. They have to be transformed into a form of “commanded love” that strive[s] to organize and structure society so that one’s neighbor will not find himself [sic] in poverty. Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 186). One of the most important contributions of Fratelli Tutti is to argue that charity must be grounded in social love:

Only a gaze transformed by charity can enable the dignity of others to be recognized and, as a consequence, the poor to be acknowledged and valued in their dignity, respected in their identity and culture, and thus truly integrated into society. That gaze is at the heart of the authentic spirit of politics. It sees paths open up that are different from those of a soulless pragmatism. (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 187)

The CPs, which embody Pope Francis’ notion of social charity, are closer to an anarchistic tradition of “self-valorization” that values the autonomy of mutual aids “based on social solidarity (outside of state control) through practices of autonomous self-management” (Shantz, 2013, p. 93). Self-valorization is not just collective resistance against neoliberal ideology but a pathway to the creation of new ways of being (Cleaver, 1991). And this pathway to the creation of new ways of being is rooted in the consciousness that “We are a global community, all in the same boat, where one person’s problems are the problems of all” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 32). Pope Francis wanted us to pull ourselves together rather than go into the direction of fragmentation and randomized atomistic individualism.

**Dismantling the Dictatorship of the Market**

Henry Giroux (2021) was right on point when he observed, “The current coronavirus pandemic is...
more than a medical crisis—it is also a political and ideological crisis. It is a crisis deeply rooted in years of neglect by neoliberal governments that denied the importance of public health and the public good while defunding the institutions that made them possible (p. 17). And Pope Francis concurred, “The fragility of world systems in the face of the pandemic has demonstrated that not everything can be resolved by market freedom” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 168).

CPs stand is a testimonial critique of market fundamentalism and the values that underlie it. The commercializing ethos of the market is alien to what Pope Francis called “gratuitousness” or “the ability to do some things simply because they are good in themselves, without concern for personal gain or recompense” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 139). On the basis of gratuitousness, the Pope condemned the market, “Life without fraternal gratuitousness becomes a form of frenetic commerce, in which we are constantly weighing up what we give and what we get back in return” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 140). What underlies CPs is gratuitousness: “to do good to others without demanding that they treat us well in return” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 140). This is more fundamental than the Marxian maxim attributed to CPs: “Share what you can, take what you need” (Untivero, 2021, para. 2). Those who participate in CPs in certain ways practice unconditional giving.

From the point of view of Fratelli Tutti, the CPs should contribute to the creation of “a global community of fraternity based on the practice of social friendship on the part of peoples and nations,” and it should call “for a better kind of politics, one truly at the service of the common good” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 154) if they really want to go beyond social charity. Consequently, “(t)his demonstrates the need for a greater spirit of fraternity” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 165). CPs can be a catalyst for changing hearts and minds of people so that they can arrest the promotion of “individualistic and uncritical culture subservient to unregulated economic interests and societal institutions at the service of those who already enjoy too much power” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 166). The fraternity and social friendship that animate CPs should replace the jungle-like rules of neoliberal economy:

We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead. How important it is to dream together… By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together. (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 8)

**From CPs to Social Movements**

The practice of social charity that should galvanize people to form social movements will “put human dignity back at the center and on that pillar build the alternative social structures we need” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 168). For Pope Francis:

What is needed is a model of social, political and economic participation “that can include popular movements and invigorate local, national and international governing structures with that torrent of moral energy that springs from including the excluded in the building of a common destiny”, while also ensuring that “these experiences of solidarity which grow up from below, from the subsoil of the planet – can come together, be more coordinated, keep on meeting one another. (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 169)

If CPs are to be effective in the long run, they should contribute to launching social movements that create “social poets” who “in their own way, work, propose, promote and liberate” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 169). Without these “social poets,” Pope Francis warned, “democracy atrophies, turns into a mere word, a formality; it loses its representative character and becomes disembodied, since it leaves out the people in their daily struggle for dignity, in the building of their future” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 169). Lauren Hudson (2021), writing about mutual aid in time of pandemic in New York shares the same sentiment. For Hudson, the aim of mutual aid group is “to create permanently organized communities of care and reciprocity” (2021, p. 178).

In the Philippine context, the challenge of FT gained more momentum when one considers the election season for 2022. The encyclical encourages “social poets” to challenge political populism: “politics is something more noble than posturing, marketing and media
spin” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 197). Social movements, when taken seriously by laypeople, are effective means to reform the existing political and electoral system. The current political climate, as the Pope observed, “no longer has to do with healthy debates about long-term plans to improve people’s lives and to advance the common good, but only with slick marketing techniques primarily aimed at discrediting others” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 16).

Social movements spearheaded by lay people can pursue social justice to address this problem. As the FT stated, “justice sought solely out of love of justice itself, out of respect for the victims,” is “a means of preventing new crimes and protecting the common good, not as an alleged outlet for personal anger” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 252). Electoral reforms are powerful tools for the people to make the state rulers accountable for their violence and neglect of the poor (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 249), especially in the time of militarized pandemic lockdowns. Making the state and its agencies accountable means, “to ‘keep alive the flame of collective conscience, bearing witness to succeeding generations to the horror of what happened’, because that witness ‘awakens and preserves the memory of the victims, so that the conscience of humanity may rise up in the face of every desire for dominance and destruction’” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 249). The FT is emphatic that, “forgiveness does not entail allowing oppressors to keep trampling on their own dignity and that of others, or letting criminals continue their wrongdoing. Those who suffer injustice have to defend strenuously their own rights and those of their family, precisely because they must preserve the dignity they have received as a loving gift from God” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 250). If CPs are to be effective in the long run, they must be geared towards educating, organizing, and rousing people to dismantle unjust structures and to prevent “dictators” and corrupt populist rulers from perpetuating themselves in power.

The church as an institution is not a non-governmental organization or a political party. In one interview, Pope Francis is very emphatic on this point, “The Church is neither a political movement nor a well-organized structure. That is not what she is. We are not an NGO, and when the Church becomes an NGO she loses her salt, she has no savor, she is only an empty organization” (Tornielli & Galeazzi, 2015/2015, p. 16). It is not a parallel government. The Church cannot spearhead the organization of mutual aid programs. The Church “does not claim to compete with earthly powers, but to offer herself as “a family among families, this is the Church, open to bearing witness in today’s world, open to faith hope and love for the Lord and for those whom he loves with a preferential love” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 276). In the words of Deus Caritas Est, “the Church wishes to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 28). The Church does this by “witnessing” in order to “accompany life, to sustain hope, to be the sign of unity… to build bridges, to break down walls, to sow seeds of reconciliation” (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 28). As a witness in the world, the Church does this primarily with “the witness of brotherly love, of solidarity and of sharing with others” (Torealli & Gleazzi, 2015, p. 16).

**Conclusion: Barbarism or Fraternity?**

In the end, the struggle to build a just and humane society will not be achieved in full. At the time of writing this paper, National Capital Region (NCR) was placed under hard lockdown (enhanced community quarantine) for the third time. And the Department of Local Government already warned the organizers of CPs to coordinate with local government units before they can proceed. Such fiat defeats the very purpose of CPs as community-based mutual aid. They are absorbed within the ambit of an authoritarian government that puts them under surveillance 24 hours a day. Social charity is policed and regulated. But as Hudson (2021) argued, “mutual-aid groups must resist neoliberal co-optation of these efforts from both the state and nonprofits” (p. 176).

Another world beyond the pandemic is possible. But neither can people go back to what is normal, for that is also the problem from the beginning. As Slovenian sociologist Zizek (2020) warned us, “There is no return to normal, the new “normal” will have to be constructed on the ruins of our old lives, or we will find ourselves in a new barbarism whose signs are already clearly discernible” (p. 3). Barbarism refers to the triumph of neoliberal capitalism.
The proliferation of CPs during the pandemic is a hopeful sign that neoliberal ethos has not yet completely colonized the mindsets of Filipinos. As Pope Francis expressed it well in an interview, “I would say that we should not consider this state of things irreversible. Let us not resign to it. Let us try to build a society and an economy where people and their well-being, not money, are at the core” (Tornielli & Galeazzi, 2015/2015, p. 145).

Yet, even if community pantries fail to address the problems of structural inequality, hopelessness and poverty during the pandemic and well beyond this pandemic, the encyclical Fratelli assures Christians and all those who are working for the transformation of the world:

Yet beyond this, those who love, and who no longer view politics merely as a quest for power, “may be sure that none of our acts of love will be lost, nor any of our acts of sincere concern for others. No single act of love for God will be lost, no generous effort is meaningless, no painful endurance is wasted. All of these encircle our world like a vital force. (Pope Francis, 2020, FT No. 195)

References


