

## Correspondence

# Building public trust in COVID-19 vaccines through the Catholic Church in the Philippines

### ABSTRACT

Due to the expedited production of the COVID-19 vaccines and other issues related to it, many Filipinos are hesitant to receive the inoculation program set by the government. Because of this, it is crucial to gain public trust for the COVID-19 vaccines. This paper argues that the Catholic Church, being an influential institution in the Philippines, can help in building public trust in COVID-19 vaccines in the country.

**Keywords** public trust, Catholic Church, COVID-19, vaccine, public health

A recent correspondence highlighted that building a sense of public trust would be an effective response to the people's COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy.<sup>1</sup> Despite the efforts of the government to establish a vaccination program, some people remain hesitant in receiving the vaccine because of its potential side effects. Moreover, the efficacy of the vaccines is still questionable.<sup>2</sup> In the Philippines, people are also hesitant due to the Dengvaxia controversy in February 2018 after the supposed vaccine led to over 100 deaths.<sup>3</sup> One way to establish the trust and regain the confidence of Filipinos toward vaccination is through the initiative of the Catholic bishops in the country to be publicly inoculated with the COVID-19 vaccine.

The president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), Archbishop Romulo Valles, said that he was inspired by Pope Francis' and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's when they were vaccinated publicly on 13 January 2021. Francis supports the vaccination by describing it as an ethical action wherein people are gambling with their life and the lives of others.<sup>4</sup> The CBCP said, if necessary, Filipino bishops are willing to be vaccinated in public and even before the television<sup>5</sup> if the act will help establish confidence in the government's vaccine campaign in allaying the public's fear of vaccination.<sup>6</sup> The movement of the Filipino bishops is to encourage the people especially the poorest of the poor in the society to get vaccinated. This is also an invitation of Pope Francis during his message on Christmas day 2020: that the government

leaders, businesses and international organizations may foster cooperation in promoting vaccines for all especially the most vulnerable and needy before all others.<sup>7</sup> According to Fr Nicanor Austriaco, OP, Filipinos nowadays do not solely rely on science due to the anxieties brought by the pandemic. Rather, people trust more in their Church's leaders.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the CBCP is supportive of and cooperative with the Philippine government in vaccinating the 70 million Filipinos against the new coronavirus this 2021 to achieve herd immunity.<sup>5</sup> Valles already took the initial step by offering the Catholic churches as facilities for the government vaccination program.

The Department of Health in the Philippines commended the support of the CBCP in transforming church facilities into vaccination sites in order to expedite the delivery of urgent healthcare needs. Health Secretary Fernando Duque III said that the CBCP adds up to the public's uptake of vaccines as the bishops expressed their willingness to get vaccinated.<sup>6</sup> Duque added that the COVID-19 immunization program cannot only be done by the government, but by the different sectors of society.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, this paper suggests the immediate collaboration between government officials and Church authorities in encouraging people to participate in COVID-19 vaccinations. The interplay between the government and the Church will form a strong partnership aimed at promoting the need for vaccines, not only in the Philippines, but also in countries that are heavily influenced by religion.

## Conflict of interest

None declared.

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