

ABSTRACT

Embracing Fraternity: Catholic Responses to COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic represents a continuation in the human history of disease. Furthermore, it also represents a continuation of Catholic care and response to disease. From the first century onward, Catholics, have been involved in caring for the sick and providing social support to effected communities. Over time, these practices have become entwined with the theology of Catholic Social Teaching, creating a framework for social outreach and community building. This thesis will detail Catholic responses to COVID on multiple levels (international to local) and compare these to disease response efforts from history in order to demonstrate that Catholic responses to COVID represent an evolution in Catholic care for the sick. This evolution has been shaped by social teaching as well as the guidance of the current pope and has many implications for the future of social support provided by the Church.

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EMBRACING FRATERNITY:
CATHOLIC RESPONSES TO COVID-19

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In 1873 a terrible disease struck Shreveport, Louisiana. Described by contemporary sources as a strain of Yellow Fever “more malignant” than any seen in previous years, this epidemic spread quickly and caused large-scale devastation. One physician, describing the events he witnessed, detailed how victims would experience a sudden onset of fever and then a rapid decline, with those who survived experiencing relapsing symptoms weeks after initially taking ill.¹ This particular Yellow Fever epidemic proved to be especially deadly, with the death toll estimated to be between 700 and over 1000 residents in a four-month period or a roughly 25% mortality rate.² With limited medical knowledge and little ability to prevent the disease, anyone from the wealthy to the poor could find themselves infected. To those in the midst of the epidemic, it would have seemed as if no one was safe, and panic ensued.

In the midst of this panic and uncertainty, the local Catholic parish stood as a beacon of hope. In a series of events that would remain celebrated even decades later, local priests and nuns risked their lives to care for the infected. Of these brave men and women, five priests and two nuns would die as a result of their dedication to caring for the sick. The story of the five priests in particular has long been hailed as an inspirational example of Christian charity. When Yellow Fever struck the city, three priests resided in

¹ Henry Smith, *Report of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1873, Shreveport, LA* (New Orleans, LA: L. Graham & Co., printers, 1874).

² “Yellow Jack! - Collections,” Willis-Knighton Talbot Medical Museum, accessed August 24, 2021, <https://museum.wkhs.com/collections/yellow-jack>.

the Shreveport area: Father Jean Pierre and Father Isidore A. Quémerais ministered to Shreveport and surrounding parishes while Father Jean-Marie Biler served as Chaplin to a nearby convent.¹ All three of these men were instructed to leave when it became clear that Yellow Fever would become an epidemic, but they all refused, choosing instead to stay and care for the sick.²

This bravery earned these men the admiration of their communities but eventually cost them their lives. The first to succumb to the disease was Father Quemerai, followed the next day by Father Pierre. The last remaining priest, Father Biler, sent word to other parishes in the area calling for reinforcements. Two priests responded to Father Biler's call, the first Father Louis Gergaud, arrived in time to give Father Biler his last rights before going on to minister to the sick alone. The next respondent, Father François LeVézouët arrived over a week later with barely enough time to give Father Gergaud his last rites before he also succumbed to the disease. Father LeVézouët survived for about a week after Father Gergaud passed, managing to request and receive aid from New Orleans right before he died. Father LeVézouët was the last priest to die during the Yellow Fever epidemic, leaving the priests he summoned from New Orleans to serve in Shreveport through the end of the epidemic and into the following year.³

These five priests willingly gave up their lives to care for their communities, and in doing so, demonstrated a core component of Catholic social teaching, a consistent

¹ "Five Priests: Servants of God," Holy Trinity Catholic Church, accessed August 25, 2021, <https://holytrinity-shreveport.com/five-priests-servants-of-god>.

² "Priests and Nuns, Heroes and Heroines," Willis-Knighton Talbot Medical Museum, accessed August 25, 2021, <https://museum.wkhs.com/collections/online-collections/details/priests-and-nuns-heroes-and-heroines>.

³ "Parish History," Holy Trinity Catholic Church, accessed August 25, 2021, <https://holytrinity-shreveport.com/parish-history>.

ethic for life and a regard for the dignity of others. Their dedication to their faith and their fellows has turned their death into an inspirational story for local parish members and, more recently, has received international recognition from the Vatican. All five of the priests who passed during the 1873 epidemic were declared “Servants of God” in December 2020, the first step in a four-step process to canonization. Beyond this momentous recognition, the Vatican has declared that nothing stands in the way of the rest of the canonization application, a tremendous victory to local parish members who have been honoring the priests for over a century.⁴ However, this recognition represents more than a victory for a dedicated local parish, it also symbolizes the support and backing of the Catholic Church. By creating a path for the canonization of these priests, the Church is signifying their approval of their actions on a significant level. This symbolizes the Catholicity of these priests’ actions and allows believers to look to them as exemplars of the Catholic faith.

Beyond their notable dedication, the Shreveport priests exemplify one response to two questions about the Catholic duty to the sick. Their choices clearly demonstrate a steadfast adherence to fraternity and Christ-like compassion best summarized by John 15:13 - “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”⁵ These men of faith gave their lives as a testament to a similar sentiment, caring for those around them without concern for their own wellbeing.⁶ This story of selfless service has

⁴ Holy Trinity Catholic Church, “Five Priests: Servants of God.”

⁵ *New International Version, New International Version* (Biblica, Inc., 2011).

⁶ As special thanks to Father Timothy Vaverek who told me about this story and encouraged me on my thesis

inspired many other to emulate the behavior of those priests and reach out to the sick in times of crisis. In the uncertain times of the present, as yet another wave of COVID spreads death and panic throughout the United States, many may find themselves considering how to respond and reflecting on what has already been done.⁷ The events that occurred during those terrible months of 1873 in Shreveport, Louisiana are not unique; history can provide many examples of disease and the desolation it can cause, but it can also provide examples of how to respond to those challenges. These five priests are but a few in a long tradition of faith leaders who responded to pandemics with love and charity for humanity, and the beliefs they clung to over a century ago are still an integral part of the Catholic faith for many.⁸ Today, facing the effects of a prolonged global pandemic, it is important to learn from the past and examine what lessons can be applied to the present to ease suffering and secure a brighter future.

In this thesis, I will argue that the Catholic response to COVID represents an evolution of long-standing principles that build upon a historically supported view of the Catholic response to disease while incorporating more modern applications of Catholic social teaching. This evolution presents a window into the possibilities of extended community care in a post-COVID world. While it would be impossible to examine all of the lasting impacts of COVID in the present work, it is possible to examine COVID within a specific context and glean some of the lessons responses to this disease can teach in order to consider what the future may hold. Looking through the same lens as those

⁷ Christal Hayes & Ryan W. Miller, "Vaccine Approval, Mandates May Help Us Control Covid by next Year, Fauci Says: Latest COVID-19 Updates," *USA Today* (Gannett Satellite Information Network), August 24, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/health/2021/08/24/covid-vaccines-mandates-masks-biden-fauci/8250548002/>.

⁸ For specific examples and discussion, see Chapter 2

Shreveport priests, this thesis will broadly examine the historical context of what defines a Christian response to disease, before focusing on how the Catholic Church has responded to the COVID pandemic on all levels of the organization. In order to understand how the Catholic Church has responded to COVID and consider how it might continue to respond, this work will examine the historical context of disease response both nationally and internationally, with a particular emphasis on COVID's most recent global predecessor, 1918 Influenza.⁹ By understanding the history and theology associated with disease responses of the past, one can more accurately examine the Catholic response to COVID and consider the future implications of such a response.

The first step in this process is examining the history of religious responses to pandemics, specifically identifying a pattern of Christian responses to be discussed in Chapter 2. Dating back to the first century, the Christian, and later Catholic, response to pandemics has been marked by community care and outreach. This socially minded model has been credited with expanding the Christian faith in the early centuries and preserving it in later centuries, allowing times of disease to strengthen rather than weaken Christian communities. Beyond serving as social support, Christian care during disease outbreaks also had the practical effect of saving lives making survivors more likely to be Christian or sympathetic to the faith.¹⁰ This practice of caring for the sick eventually evolved into a pattern seemingly present in some form during all major pandemics up to

⁹ While there have been other epidemics or pandemics of concern, such as Swine Flu, in between the 1918 outbreak of Influenza and COVID-19, these two form the most useful and similar comparison point.

¹⁰ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997).

this point, in times of sickness Catholic communities would reach out to the sick and decreased mortality, reinforce the bonds of their communities, and attract more members or strengthen the faith of existing members.¹¹ It is with this historical precedent in mind that the Catholic response to COVID can be examined in later chapters.

However, before a full examination of the response to COVID can be conducted, it is important to understand one of its more modern influences, Catholic social teaching. To be discussed at length in Chapter 3, Pope Leo XIII is often credited with creating the framework of modern-day Catholic social teaching in his 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*.¹² In this encyclical Leo lays out a framework for how believers should engage with the modern world, critiquing poor working conditions, advocating for the rights of the poor, and pushing for a society where Church organizations created change.¹³ Leo's assertion that Catholics have a duty to the poor revolutionized Catholic social outreach in many ways, eventually giving rise to the unified doctrine of Catholic social teaching. Embraced at all levels of the church from the Pope to local bishops, social teachings have influenced disease response and shaped it to be in keeping with the historical pattern to be established in Chapter 2. Especially during this current COVID pandemic, social teaching informs many aspects of the Catholic COVID response, necessitating an understanding of this theology as foundational to the rest of the Catholic response.

¹¹ For a full discussion, see Chapter 2.

¹² Denis M. Hughes & Brian Jordan, "Catholic social Teachings call to the dignity of creation," *NRC*, accessed March 01, 2021, from <https://www.ncronline.org/news/justice/catholic-social-teachings-call-dignity-creation>.

¹³ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, encyclical letter, May 15, 1891, http://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.pdf.

Once an understanding of the historical and theological context of the Catholic COVID response has been established, Chapter 4 will detail the response to the initial wave of COVID on a national and international level. Key to understanding the international response is a discussion on the current Pope, Pope Francis. Francis is a unique pope who places a strong emphasis on Catholic social teaching, bringing this perspective to bear on all issues placed before the papacy. This dedication to social involvement and universal fraternity demonstrates the influence of his childhood and has shaped the Vatican's response to COVID, as well as their general guidelines as laid out by their COVID commission.¹⁴ This commitment to social teaching at the level of the Vatican has also influenced the national response on the part of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), as they advocate for a response that is health conscious and community focused, encouraging local parishes to maintain digital community when physical community is impossible.¹⁵ This emphasis on social care and community outreach within the context of social teaching has been echoed outside of church leadership as well. On both the national and international level, charities have worked to provide relief to those most impacted by the pandemic, demonstrating an evolution to the pattern of Catholic care to be established in Chapter 2. The Catholic response to COVID on both levels suggests that community care and outreach has moved beyond caring for only the sick, to caring for the broader community with a future-focused goal.

¹⁴ For a more detailed explanation see the beginning of Chapter 4.

¹⁵ "COVID-19," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed March 18, 2021, <https://www.usccb.org/committees/communications/covid-19>.

This evolution is also modeled in the discussion of local Catholic responses in Chapter 5. Chapter 5 will examine how the historical and theological context of Catholic disease response has influenced local dioceses by examining their response to COVID, demonstrating continuity and evolution of the pattern of care discussed in Chapter 2. When exploring the reactions of each of the four dioceses discussed in the chapter, all demonstrate a commitment to community preservation during each wave of the pandemic as well as ever-changing reopening plans for the future.¹⁶ In their own unique way, each diocese has utilized preexisting social support and distribution structures to care for those most impacted by sickness or lockdowns demonstrating an embrace of social teaching and a strong consideration for community good. It seems that a robust local response in each locale has had an even greater impact than national responses as faith leaders work to meet the unique needs of their own communities. These responses have been designed to strengthen communities beyond the current crisis, with several including plans to deal with long-term social inequality once COVID has abated. Whether or not this social outreach continues into the future remains to be seen, but the consideration for the future and broader community on a local level demonstrates an evolution of what is possible, expanding the idea of caring for the sick into a far more encompassing idea of caring for humanity.

Finally, after exploring the context for the Catholic response to COVID as well as the response and its effect, Chapter 6 will consider the implications of these lessons for a post-COVID world. When considering all aspects of the Catholic response to COVID it

¹⁶ As is discussed at length in Chapter 5, many dioceses have responded differently to meet the needs of their communities, consider the Archdiocese of Washington vs the Diocese of Austin.

is clear that social teaching has been incredibly influential, and that the current response represents a modern continuation of care for the sick. In addition, COVID has highlighted social inequalities and spurred Church leaders at many levels to plan to remedy them.¹⁷ This combination has created a framework for continued outreach in a post-COVID world, one that is in keeping with the tenants of social teaching, as well as the wishes of the current pope. Whether or not this framework will be utilized after the pandemic is still uncertain, but its creation still marks an evolution of the patterns discussed in Chapter 2. Understanding the community impact of the Catholic COVID response is key to evaluate the response and its shaping factors, opening the door for more research to be conducted in the future.

Exploring the Catholic response to COVID in real-time allows this thesis to grapple with the ever-changing nature of the pandemic and speak to the confusion that many of the faithful are currently dealing with. The result will be an initial reflection of the current situation revealing how the Catholic Church has been able to rally around the unifying message of Pope Francis, utilize national and local aid infrastructure, and plan for the future as part of an evolution in disease response that has not been seen before. By utilizing the tools of the digital age and the wealth of scientific and public health information available to them, the Church has been able to address the challenges of COVID, maintain community, and extend its outreach beyond just those who are sick to support broader communities in uncertain times. This new approach to communal care during times of sickness has hopeful implications for a post-COVID world but is well beyond what the Shreveport priest would have imagined possible in their day. In order to

¹⁷ See Chapter 4 for the Vatican Commission's approach or Chapter 5 for local-level solutions.

best appreciate the opportunities of the present, it is important to consider the limitations of the past and consider how the Church was able to cope without these advances.

CHAPTER TWO

History

Before any specific responses to the current pandemic can be examined, the historical context for Christian responses to sickness must be understood. The idea of ministering to the sick as a religious duty is as old as Christianity itself. Throughout the New Testament Jesus' ministry often involves the sick and marginalized, with numerous examples of Jesus reaching out to heal lepers, those possessed by evil spirits, and even raising the dead.¹ This ministry was continued by Peter, Paul, and many other apostles after Jesus, setting a precedent that has lingered as a hallmark of Christianity to this day.²

An examination of several of the most notorious plagues in the Common Era reveals a strong Christian presence with several commonalities that reverberate across the centuries. During each of these devastating events, large portions of Christian communities became actively involved in caring for the sick, reinforced community bonds, and somewhat miraculously grew in membership or faith. This pattern has turned the history of pandemics into periods of religious revival, adaptation, and growth and offers hope for a post COVID world.

¹ Mt 8:1 4; Mk 1:40 45; Lk 11:14; Jn 11:1 44

² Mt. 8:16, 12:15, 14:14; Mk. 7:37, 16:17-18; Acts 4:22

One of the first notable plagues to occur in the Common Era was the Antonine Plague during the second century. The plague, thought to have been caused by smallpox, is reported to have killed up to a quarter of the Roman Empire's population and it lasted for over twenty years.¹ It was this pandemic that first illustrated what would become a pattern of Christian responses to disease. Early Christian theologians, such as Irenaeus of Gaul, argued that the body was important to God and salvation, and advocated for a continuation of Christ's healing ministry.² In part due to this theological discourse, Christians took care of the sick instead of shunning them. This seemingly simple act had significant reverberations, in fact, Rodney Stark asserts that part of the reason Christianity became the global religion that it is today is because of early Christian's ministry towards the sick. Christians who cared for the sick out of a sense of religious obligation increased the survival rates of those they cared for, making survivors more likely to either be Christian or at least be sympathetic to the faith of those that cared for them and their community.³

This growing public sympathy was evident as conversions increased during the plague, despite Marcus Aurelius' harsh anti-Christian laws and rhetoric. This rhetoric, much like inflammatory rhetoric that would be seen during later pandemics centered around blaming a scapegoat for Rome's troubles, and to Aurelius, Christians made the

¹ John Horgan, Antonine Plague, *World History Encyclopedia*, May 2, 2019, https://www.ancient.eu/Antonine_Plague/.

² Andrew Dauntton-Fear, *Healing in the Early Church: The Church's Ministry of Healing and Exorcism from the First to the Fifth Century* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009).

³ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*

perfect scapegoat.⁴ As monotheists that refused to make scarifies to the Greco-Roman pantheon, Christians were clearly different from their contemporaries and often singled out for persecution. However, instead of causing communal disintegration, the dual challenges of pandemic and religious persecution seemed to strengthen Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire.⁵ In order to effectively care for the sick, Christian communities had to come together and reaffirm their faith, slowly gaining the respect of those around them. In a pattern that would become distinct in later centuries, when faced with plague Christian communities reached out to the sick and decreased mortality, reinforcing the bonds of their communities and attracting more members.

This pattern was solidified about a century later during the plague of Cyprian. The responses to this plague were best documented in the accounts of Saint Cyprian and Dionysius of Alexandria. In fact, the plague earned Cyprian's name because his account of the plague, *De Mortalitate*, is the basis for most of our historical knowledge of the plague. This account, corroborated by other historical records, describes the terrible way that sufferers died; in pain, paralyzed, and often bleeding from the mouth and eyes. This gruesome disease caused people to shun the sick and abandon towns where the disease was found. As the plague swept through the empire, it caused political instability and famine as it killed emperors and farmers alike.⁶ It was during this pandemic that Cyprian became especially involved in his community, encouraging wealthy church members to

⁴ Horgan, "Antonine Plague."

⁵ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*

⁶ John Horgan, "Plague of Cyprian, 250-270 CE," *World History Encyclopedia* (December 13, 2016), <https://www.ancient.eu/article/992/plague-of-cyprian-250-270-ce/>.

donate funds to care for the sick and calling on all to help with this care.⁷ Cyprian laid out his encouragements in *De Mortalitate*, telling his audience that there was a solidarity in suffering that affected Christians and non-Christians alike.⁸ In addition, Cyprian boldly dismissed the idea that Christians should somehow be spared from the pains of the world and instead encouraged his believers to look at the plague as a test of their faith, promising hope for not only those that survived but also for those that succumbed to the disease. In part because of his view of the plague as a test, Cyprian encouraged his followers to care for others regardless of if they were Christians or not, and much like believers during the Antonine Plague, these Christians were able to slow the spread of disease and reduce mortality rates.⁹

The work of Cyprian's congregation was not an isolated occurrence. Miles away, Dionysius also encouraged ministry to the sick and called those who died caring for others martyrs. This high honor compelled even more believers to provide care.¹⁰ While Dionysius did not openly encourage the care of all men in the way that Cyprian did, he was highly critical of the people who abandoned their cities to leave the sick dying in their beds.¹¹ In a letter to his congregation, Dionysius praised the Christians that laid down their lives to care for others and he spoke to the suffering the congregation had

⁷ Bryan Just, "Historic Plagues and Christian Responses: Lessons for the Church Today?," *Christian Journal for Global Health* 7, no. 1 (April 2020): pp. 7-12, <https://doi.org/10.15566/cjgh.v7i1.373>.

⁸ Laidlaw College, "Cyprian's Response to an Epidemic," *The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice*, (May 17, 2020), https://hail.to/laidlaw-college/publication/z0YvCh2/article/9PLvTsP#_edn2.

⁹ Just, "Historic Plagues and Christian Responses."

¹⁰ Just, "Historic Plagues and Christian Responses"

¹¹ Matthew Namee, "St. Dionysius on the Epidemic of Alexandria," *The Society for Orthodox Christian History in the Americas*, March 16, 2020, <https://orthodoxhistory.org/2020/03/16/st-dionysius-on-the-epidemic-of-alexandria/>.

already faced. In Alexandria, the plague of Cyprian began just as the persecution of Christians in that area had begun to subside, and instead of being able to rest, Dionysius' congregation was called to face a new challenge. This dual difficulty of persecution and disease was similar to the difficulties Christians in Rome faced a century earlier under Marcus Aurelius, and much like those Christians, Dionysius' congregation grew stronger as a result of the plague.¹² As the Christian population increased in subsequent years after the plague, the growing minority began to influence mainstream Roman culture, becoming more and more acceptable until in 313, the Roman Emperor Constantine signed the Edict of Milan, granting Christians religious toleration.¹³

The Edict granted Christians unprecedented freedom and safety, allowing the religion to grow even more as Rome crumbled and new powers emerged in Europe. This pattern of Christian responses to disease established by the early plagues played out and changed again and again as outbreaks of disease swept through Europe and beyond from 541 onward, notably causing the Plague of Justinian and the Black Death.¹⁴ These outbreaks were notable to history because like the Antonine Plague and the Plague of Cyprian, they had an alarmingly high mortality rate and caused disfigurement in the infected, adding to the panic. These outbreaks also tended to accompany other misfortunes such a war, famine, or persecution forcing Christian communities to solidify their foundations or dissipate.¹⁵ As Christianity grew in Europe, so too did the number of

¹² Namee, "St. Dionysius on the Epidemic."

¹³ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Edict of Milan," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Edict-of-Milan>.

¹⁴ Samuel K Cohn, "4 Epidemiology of the Black Death and Successive Waves of Plague," *Medical History* 52, no. S27 (2008): pp. 74-100, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0025727300072100>.

¹⁵ Horgan, "Plague of Cyprian."

Christian responses to pandemics. While there were always believers that advocated for a continuation of Christ's healing ministry and those that risked their lives to care for others, there were also those that succumbed to their fear and fled. These later accounts of Christians exhibiting the full range of human responses to death and disease better help to explain Christian, or even merely human, responses to disease in the modern world.

The first instance of this newer Christian response to disease and death was the Plague of Justinian that began in 541. The plague reached Constantinople in 542 where it had an enormous death toll (300,000 +), and outbreaks continued to occur until 750. Brought in by trade routes and spread by fleas, this pandemic was likely caused by a strain of *Y. pestis* similar to the strain that would cause the Black Death centuries later. Like many previous epidemics, the Justinian Plague struck during a time of hardship as Europe was suffering the effects of a famine brought on by a years-long cold snap and sporadic war. As people migrated throughout the continent to find food and avoid violence, they brought the disease with them, turning an isolated outbreak into a devastating pandemic.¹⁶

It was under these circumstances that the predominantly Christian Byzantine Empire had to respond, and many of these responses were rooted in the Empire's shared Christian faith. One Byzantine historian, Procopius, described the plague in his book *Secret History*.¹⁷ Procopius described fevers, swelling, and hallucinations in plague victims and he blamed the outbreak of plague on Justinian himself; attributing the plague

¹⁶ John Horgan, "Justinian's Plague (541-542 CE)," *World History Encyclopedia*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.ancient.eu/article/782/justinians-plague-541-542-ce/>.

¹⁷ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Procopius," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, May 18, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Procopius-Byzantine-historian>.

to his ineffective leadership and sin, saying Justinian was a demon or being punished by God.¹⁸ Procopius was not alone in his attribution of the plague to divine retribution, many of the common people desperately turned to more extreme religious practices, like cults dedicated to various saints or the Virgin Mary, in an attempt to appease God.¹⁹

Furthermore, members of the clergy, especially John of Ephesus, attributed this assumed divine retribution to the actions of pagans living within the Byzantine Empire. Clergymen like John saw pagans as a threat not only to the health of the Empire but also to the soul of the Empire, causing them to lead purges against pagan villages, cutting down sacred trees, destroying temples, and causing fear to stamp out paganism.²⁰ Many of these responses were rooted in fear of further divine wrath, and some believers even thought that Judgement Day was on the horizon as their lives were torn apart by war, famine, and disease.²¹

However, these were not the only documented responses that occurred during this time. While some Christians blamed the plague on divine retribution and reacted with fear, others, especially those during later waves of the pandemic, demonstrated the same patterns that Christian communities had demonstrated during plagues of earlier centuries, reaching out, caring for the sick, and increasing conversions. One prominent example of this can be seen in the life of Theodore of Sykeon. Theodore survived the first wave of

¹⁸ Horgan, "Justinian's Plague"

¹⁹ Uday Chandra, "Thinking Theologically with Pandemics," *Al Jazeera*, July 28, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/7/28/thinking-theologically-with-pandemics>.

²⁰ John Atkinson, "The Plague of 542: Not the Birth of the Clinic," *Acta Classica* 45 (2002): 1-18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24595323>.

²¹ Lester K. Little, ed., *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541-750*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009).

the plague in 541 when he had a miraculous recovery after being brought to a church dedicated to John the Baptist.²² This miraculous recovery influenced Theodore so much that he dedicated his later life to the Church as a monk.²³ When his hometown was threatened by another wave of the plague later in his life, he responded not by running away or finding a scapegoat, but by returning home and organizing a mass procession and prayer in an attempt to ward off the disease. This reaction allowed his community to rally around him and persevere through the hardships of disease, war, and famine more easily, as they relied on Theodore to bring them back to their faith. Theodore helped foster a response like the Christian responses of old because of his dedication to asceticism and his ability to perform miraculous healings of the sick. Because Theodore did not fear disease and made a point of healing the afflicted when he could, he was able to transmit these ideas to his followers and create a more robust response in the region where he lived.²⁴

Other examples of Christians turning towards their religious leaders as a source of hope exist West of the Byzantine Empire as well. While the plague of Justinian impacted the Byzantine Empire earlier than it did Western Europe, by 590 the plague was pervasive enough in the west to prompt the action of the Vatican. As in the Byzantine Empire, the plague was not the only disaster occurring in Rome when it arrived; Rome was facing a series of famines, earthquakes, and flooding that had already claimed the

²² Little, ed., *Plague and the End of Antiquity*.

²³ Atkinson. "The Plague of 542."

²⁴ Eftymios Rizos, "Georgios of Sykeon, Life of Theodoros, Abbot of Sykeon and Bishop of Anastasiopolis," *Cult of Saints*, E05291 - <http://csla.history.ox.ac.uk/record.php?recid=E05291>.

lives of thousands.²⁵ Then, as the Plague began to spread in Italy, Pope Pelagius II took ill and died, prompting the election of Pope Gregory the Great.²⁶ Immediately, Gregory set about appealing to God's mercy to end the suffering in Rome. Gregory encouraged Christians, especially bishops, to care for the sick and not to shun them as part of their Christian duty.²⁷ As more people heeded Gregory's encouragement to provide both physical and spiritual care, the incidences of plague began to decline, culminating in a mass procession led by Gregory through the heart of Rome. At the time, this was believed to have cleared the air and removed the plague from the city. Regardless of whether the plague was miraculously cleared in this manner, the Christian response in Rome prior to the procession likely saved many lives. Just like the Christians before them, by administering basic nursing care, these sixth and seventh-century Christians were able to reduce mortality in a way that would have seemed miraculous, increasing conversions and strengthening faith in the Catholic Church for many.²⁸

Even after the plague of Justinian subsided, there were sporadic outbreaks of disease throughout Europe, but none as impactful as the Black Death that would sweep Europe in the 14th Century. The Black Death presents a unique opportunity to examine Christian responses to disease, because, by the 14th century, Christianity was the predominant religion of Europe. Whereas during the plagues of the second and third

²⁵ Philip Kosloski, "During a Deadly Plague, Pope Gregory Had This Consoling Vision of St. Michael the Archangel," *Aleteia*, May 8, 2019, <https://aleteia.org/2019/05/07/during-a-deadly-plague-pope-gregory-had-this-consoling-vision-of-st-michael-the-archangel/>.

²⁶ Rizos, "Georgios of Sykeon."

²⁷ Kevin Knight, ed., *Pastoral Rule (Book I)*, (Gregory the Great via New Advent), <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/36011.htm>.

²⁸ Kosloski, "Pope Gregory"
Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*.

centuries, Christians represented a religious minority, during the Black Death, Christianity was widely adopted and intertwined with European society.²⁹ In addition, the Edict of Thessalonica had decreed Nicene Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire in 380, leading to the Christian Church coming to prominence.³⁰ This emergence of a centralized authority for the Christian faith slowly changed Christian responses to pandemics as more of the population began relying on priests and the Vatican to influence what should be done.³¹ The emergence of a Catholic Europe also meant that Christian communities were no longer comprised of the few who could withstand religious persecution, but of everyone. This difference in demographics is key to understanding the array of Christian responses to the Black Death. While it is likely that the chroniclers of earlier plagues chose to document Christians reaching out more often than stories of them shunning the sick, it is still reasonable to assume that a significant proportion of early Christians reached out to aid their fellow man. This is however not true of many Christians during the 14th-century outbreak of the Black Death. Even more so than the plague of Justinian, the Black Death presents a window into reactions more like our own in the modern era; while some people chose to stay and help their peers,

²⁹ “Religion in the 13th and 14th Centuries,” Decameron Web, Brown University, last modified March 1, 2010, https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/religion/culture/background.php.

³⁰ “Edict of Thessalonica,” Project Gutenberg Self-Publishing - eBooks, accessed April 1, 2021, http://www.self.gutenberg.org/articles/eng/Edict_of_Thessalonica#Background.

³¹ This is a continuation of this influence, as was seen during the plague of Justinian 2 centuries after the edict as well as during the Black Death centuries later.

others chose to protect themselves, abandon the less fortunate, and find scapegoats for their troubles.³²

The Black Death was a frightening time for both the lay people and clergy alike, with many of them attributing the disease to God's condemnation. Unlike Cyprian in the third century, who viewed the pandemic of his time as a test to strengthen the faith of his followers, many members of the Catholic clergy, including Pope Clement VI very clearly articulated their opinion that the Black Death was a punishment from God.³³ This belief had unintended consequences as many saw this as an excuse to persecute European Jews, erroneously believing that God was punishing Europe for the Jews' sins. This persecution led to more death and hysteria, eventually causing Pope Clement VI to intervene with a papal bull *Quamvis Perfidiam*.³⁴ This bull clearly states that the Jews were not to blame for Black Death and that they did not, as many accused, poison wells to bring about the pandemic. The fact that this bull was necessary to prevent violence against a religious minority demonstrates how much Christians' societal standing had evolved since the early centuries of the Common Era. Once a religious minority that faced persecution, now some European Catholics had to be encouraged not to persecute a religious minority in a similar position. This example illustrates how power dynamics can impact responses to pandemics; when Christians were a minority, they viewed the plague as a test rather than punishment and they were often the ones to suffer violence, but when they were a

³² Mark Galli, "When a Third of the World Died," *Christian History*, January 1, 1996, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-49/black-death-christian-response-third-world-died.html>.

³³ Joshua J. Mark, "Religious Responses to the Black Death," *World History Encyclopedia*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1541/religious-responses-to-the-black-death/>.

³⁴ "Papal Bulls," *Jewish Virtual Library*, 2008, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/papal-bulls>.

majority, many saw the plague as a punishment on other people and often inflicted violence. This can hardly be attributed to Christians uniquely, but rather should be understood as part of the broader cultural context that informs reactions to disease.

Regardless of changing societal power dynamics, a common Christian response to the Black Death was a focus on trying to appease God in a variety of ways. Many religious leaders advised that the best way to appease God was to repent for sins, causing many Christians to engage in fasting, prayer, and religious processions on a large, sometimes even city-wide scale.³⁵ Clement himself even encouraged believers to repent and granted a remission of sins to those that died of plague in an attempt to address the spiritual wellbeing of Christians who were dying often without access to confession or last rites.³⁶ However, when these more traditional measures did not end the pandemic, some more zealous believers took the idea of penance a step further, and joined a religious sect called the Flagellants.³⁷ The Flagellants had maintained a small following in Northern Italy and had spread throughout the rest of Europe as a fringe movement before the Black Death broke out, but they gained a significant following during the plague.³⁸ The Flagellants practiced religious flagellation, the practice of wounding their physical bodies in an attempt to atone for sin. By beating themselves publicly, the Flagellants claimed to be able to grant salvation for sins, something that previously could

³⁵ Mark, "Religious Responses to the Black Death."

³⁶ "Pope Clement VI," Project Gutenberg Self-Publishing - eBooks, accessed February 2021, http://self.gutenberg.org/articles/Pope_Clement_VI.

³⁷ Mark, "Religious Responses to the Black Death."

³⁸ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Flagellants," Encyclopaedia Britannica, December 6, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/flagellants>.

only be obtained through the Catholic Church. With people dying regardless of their religious or social status, many Catholics flocked to the Flagellant movement, seeing it as a way to receive protection that the Catholic Church could not offer them.³⁹ This desperate attempt to appease God through physical mutilation did not go unnoticed by the Catholic Church, with many of the clergy seeing it as a sign that the Church's power over the people was disintegrating. In response, Clement condemned Flagellants as heretics and encouraged Christians to continue to follow the direction of the Catholic Church.⁴⁰ This condemnation did not have much of an impact though, and the Flagellants maintained their following throughout the pandemic.

As a result of Christians desperately trying to find a way to appease God, the Black Death, like the plagues of earlier centuries, led to a kind of religious revival. However, instead of generating new converts to Christianity as earlier plagues had done, the Black Death highlighted growing rifts in the Catholic Church. While many believers redoubled their efforts to be involved with the Church, leading to an increase in donations and pilgrimage, many others felt that the Church had been unable to protect them. Many in the latter group did not find satisfactory answers to their questions about why the plague would still kill good, pious people in one city, but might spare bad people in another.⁴¹ The plague also revealed that many members of the Catholic clergy were not willing to put themselves in harm's way for their congregations, as many bishops and

³⁹ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 125.

⁴⁰ David Herlihy, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁴¹ Galli, "When a Third of the World Died."

priests fled when the disease struck their city or town. For many, it was difficult to reconcile the death and destruction they witnessed with what they were taught to believe, and this led to a significant erosion of the Catholic Church's power during this time.⁴² This mistrust in the Church set the stage for the reforms that eventually lead to the Protestant Reformation in 1517.

However, despite the shortcoming of the Catholic Church in several areas, there were still many clergy and laypeople who took it upon themselves to minister to the sick and care for members of their communities. A prime example of this can be seen in the action of the man who would become Saint Roch. Roch was born as an only child to a wealthy French family and he is reported to have been born with a cross-shaped birthmark which may have encouraged him to pursue a religious life at an early age. As an adult, he donated his inheritance to the poor and went on pilgrimage to Rome at the same time the plague was rapidly spread throughout Italy. Upon seeing all of the suffering caused by the plague, Roch decided to stop in towns on his way to and from Rome to care for plague victims. Instead of shunning them, or avoiding towns known to be infected, Roch went out of his way to find and care for sick people, routinely calling on God to heal them and reportedly causing several miraculous recoveries.⁴³ This commitment to aiding the sick eventually cost Roch his life and he died of the very plague he had helped treat. However, even after his death, St. Roch's legacy lived on and his story became tremendously popular during the plague, he was venerated widely

⁴² Herlihy, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West*.

⁴³ "St. Roch History," Mary, Queen of Peace Parish, accessed March 5, 2021, <https://princeofpeacepittsburgh.com/st-roch-history>.

across Europe for over 200 years after his death until Pope Gregory XIV officially canonized him in 1427.⁴⁴

In addition to the self-sacrificing actions of St. Roch, many other priests and clergymen found the courage to stay and care for their congregations during the plague. While it is true that many priests and bishops did flee the plague and eroded public trust in the church, many others stayed behind to care for their parishioners. While the stories of these priests may be less well-known, there is evidence for their sacrifice in the historical records from that time. In his book, *The Great Mortality*, author John Kelly asserts that the mortality rate for priests during the black death was between 42 and 45%, a rate generally considered to be higher than the mortality rate for the general population.⁴⁵ The priests who stayed often died because, much like St. Roch, they bravely went in to care for the sick until they became sick. These priests exemplified the healing practices established by earlier Christians and helped their communities recover from the plague, continuing the pattern of care in the areas they oversaw.

While the Black Death does not play out as neatly into the pattern of religious revival, adaptation, and growth that early plagues seemed to fit into, it still demonstrates some continuities in the Christian response to pandemics. The mistrust of the Catholic Church and rise of movements like the Flagellants eventually led to sweeping religious reforms and revival across Europe. And for those who still found solace in the Church, the plague served as a test of faith that many clergymen could reflect back on in later years as a point of spiritual significance.

⁴⁴ “St. Roch,” Saint Charles Borromeo Catholic Church of Picayune, accessed April 2, 2021, <http://www.scborromeo.org/saints/roch.htm>.

⁴⁵ John Kelly, *The Great Mortality* (HarperCollins, 2005), 224.

Furthermore, Christians did experience adaptation and growth during this time. Many traditional religious practices such as last rites and other funerary practices had to be altered in light of the pandemic, and many people who were not strong believers felt drawn back towards their faith as they witness the death around them.⁴⁶ Overall, these 14th century Christians responded in ways that illustrated their flawed humanity. The reaction to the Black Death also caused the Catholic Church to implement reforms over the next few centuries that would leave it better equipped to care for its congregations and respond to pandemics.

Many of these reforms occurred within the context of the Protestant Reformation which caused the Catholic Church to engage in reforms to try to address some of the systemic issues that were causing people to leave the church. While the power of the Catholic church had been declining in some areas of Europe before the Plague, the aftermath of the Black Death exacerbated the problem. In the midst of this upheaval, one of the biggest issues the Catholic church had to address in the Plague's wake was a sudden lack of clergymen. So many members of the clergy had died during the pandemic, that they had to be rapidly replaced with people who were less qualified and more susceptible to bribery and lechery than some of their better-vetted colleagues had been. This left the church susceptible to outside political manipulation, resulting in multiple scandals, including the election of two different popes at the same time when French nobility used their power and influence to get a French pope elected.⁴⁷ These scandals

⁴⁶ Mark, "Religious Responses to the Black Death."

⁴⁷ Norman F. Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made New* (York: Free Press, 2001).

combined with clerical abuse of power such as selling indulgences or selling church positions eventually led to the Reformation.

Among the things the Church addressed during their reformation from the 16th to 17th century were disciplinary rulings seeking to abolish corruption among the clergy and prescriptions about pastoral care to avoid clergymen abandoning their congregations spiritually or physically.⁴⁸ At the Council of Trent, the Church also tried to standardize religious training for clergymen, assuming that, to combat Protestant ideas, the clergy had to be knowledgeable about Catholic doctrine and be able to pass this knowledge along to the faithful. These reforms impart contributed to the brave actions of Catholic clergy in later pandemics by reestablishing expectations of pastoral care and religious life. In addition, this sudden burst of religious conviction also led to religious persecution of protestants, either through the Inquisition or through less official means such as social isolation. This combination of reform inside the church and prosecution for those outside of the church created a very unique political landscape in Europe where the power of the Catholic church became increasingly unstable forcing the church to begin to focus more on securing itself from within so that political powers would not exert an inordinate influence on Church decisions.⁴⁹

In the centuries following the Black Death, the power of the Catholic church shifted as it was weakened by events like the Protestant Reformation but strengthened by the actions of Catholic colonial powers in the Americas. This shifting religious and

⁴⁸ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Counter-Reformation," Encyclopaedia Britannica, May 18, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Counter-Reformation>.

⁴⁹ Britannica, "Counter-Reformation."

political landscape meant that a predominantly Catholic Europe was becoming a diversified Europe, the key difference being that as more factions of Christianity began to arise the power of the Catholic Church on secular matters waned.⁵⁰ Specifically, in countries like Germany, Switzerland, and England, where new sects were founded, the Catholic Church lost some political influence, but still had influence over Catholics in those countries, creating tension between religious and political beliefs. This transition was not peaceful and often led to wars and rebellions between Catholic and Protestant factions or countries. Some of this tension spilled over into the global exploration that was underway as countries like England and Spain competed to find and claim new land for their country and their faith.⁵¹

The first Catholics to reach what would become the United States were Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries who began arriving in the 1600s with the support of Spain and later France. These missionaries established schools and tried to convert indigenous populations, but with limited success. Because the colonies established by England in North America were predominantly protestant and usually had anti-Catholic views, Catholics were a religious minority in the colonies and after that in the United States. However, despite being in the minority, Catholics were still able to command significant social capital in the communities where they composed a significant percentage of the

⁵⁰ History.com Editors, "The Reformation," History.com, December 2, 2009, <https://www.history.com/topics/reformation/reformation>.

⁵¹ John L. Phelan, "The Influence of Religion on the History of the New World," *The Americas* 14, no. 4 (1958): 502-06. Accessed April 2, 2021. doi:10.2307/978919.

population, such as Philadelphia.⁵² In these places, Catholic communities established parishes, orphanages, health centers for the poor, and other means of community outreach and support. These systems proved to be quite helpful to the broader communities in which Catholics lived, especially during outbreaks of Yellow Fever in the 18th and 19th centuries when secular social and health infrastructure was often lacking.⁵³

A prime example of the American Catholic community following a pattern of outreach and care for the sick similar to the first few centuries can be seen in the Yellow Fever outbreaks that occurred in the United States, especially Philadelphia between 1793 and 1805.⁵⁴ Yellow Fever is now understood to be a vector-borne virus that is spread from person to person via infected mosquitoes, but in 1793, this was not known.⁵⁵ For people living through the Philadelphia outbreaks, it would seem as though the disease appeared from nowhere and caused a terrifyingly unpredictable range of symptoms, from no symptoms at all to jaundice and organ failure. During the initial Philadelphia epidemic, over 5,000 people died, and the local government collapsed because they were unable to care for the number of sick residents.⁵⁶ This was especially troublesome for the United States as a whole because in 1793 Philadelphia was the nation's capital and the

⁵² “History of the Catholic Church in the United States,” United States Council of Catholic Bishops, accessed April 3, 2021, <https://www.usccb.org/offices/public-affairs/history-catholic-church-united-states>.

⁵³ The outbreak of Yellow Fever discussed in the introduction is a prime example of this.

⁵⁴ “Major American Epidemics of Yellow Fever (1793-1905),” Public Broadcasting Service, accessed February 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/fever-major-american-epidemics-of-yellow-fever/>.

⁵⁵ “Yellow Fever,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, January 15, 2019, <https://www.cdc.gov/yellowfever/index.html>.

⁵⁶ History.com Editors, “Yellow Fever Breaks out in Philadelphia,” History.com, November 13, 2009, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/yellow-fever-breaks-out-in-philadelphia>.

federal authorities were forced to evacuate when it became clear that the local government could not control the outbreak.

It was in the midst of this chaos and death that the Catholic church in Philadelphia responded. Like the Christians of antiquity, these Christians made a point of addressing the physical and spiritual needs of Philadelphia, often at great personal cost. During the initial 1793 outbreak, the deaths of priests F. A. Flemings and Lawrence Grassel were recorded in a local newspaper that labeled their deaths as a significant loss to the community, noting that they gave their lives to care for the sick. These sacrifices did not occur as an isolated incident but are instead corroborated by records from a secondary outbreak of Yellow Fever in 1797. During this outbreak, the death of several priests who also contracted Yellow Fever while trying to care for members of their congregations was noted. The willingness of the clergy to sacrifice themselves to care for the sick also motivated laypeople to become involved in the outreach just as their peers in Louisiana would several decades later.⁵⁷ In one notable story from 1797, an Irish woman volunteered to bring communion to several priests who were dying of Yellow Fever so that they too could be cared for in their final hours.⁵⁸ This involvement of laypeople with the clergy in ministering to the sick helped strengthen the Catholic community in Philadelphia because, as Christian communities of old, they were able to come together and care for each other when many other people fled.

⁵⁷ See intro.

⁵⁸ "Epidemic of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia, 1793-1805—Deaths of Fathers Graessl, Fleming, Lagrange, Ennis, Burke and Catholic Notables —The Number of Catholic Victims," *The American Catholic Historical Researches*, New Series, 7, no. 3 (1911): 239-44, Accessed April 2, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44374927>.

In addition to providing basic nursing and pastoral care, Catholics during the Yellow Fever outbreak also reached out to address other social needs that arose as a result of the epidemic. One of these social needs took the form of a massive influx of newly orphaned children that the local government did not have the tools to care for. This problem was solved in part by Catholics who worked together to establish St. John's Orphan Asylum for Boys and St. Joseph's Asylum for Girls.⁵⁹ While sources disagree on exactly who founded these orphanages, they do generally agree that were created as a response of the Catholic community in Philadelphia, first to care for the children of recently dead Catholic parents, and then to help address the overwhelming number of new orphans in Philadelphia overall.⁶⁰ At the time, these institutions were a better alternative for orphans or neglected children than what was typically available. Instead of living on the streets or having to enter a life of indentured servitude in order to survive, these early orphanages were able to provide children with a roof over their heads, consistent meals, and occasionally life skills training. These orphanages were run by local parishes and staffed by nuns who saw caring for these children as an extension of their religious duty to care for the poor.⁶¹ By doing this the Catholic community exemplified the outreach modeled by earlier Christians and they were able to strengthen the Catholic community by providing a social safety net that was almost unheard of during that time.⁶²

⁵⁹ "The History of Catholic Social Services," Catholic Social Services Archdiocese of Philadelphia, accessed March 2021, <https://cssphiladelphia.org/the-history-of-catholic-social-services/>.

⁶⁰ Mary Viatora Schuller, "A History of Catholic Orphan Homes in the United States, 1727 to 1884" (Dissertations, Loyola University Chicago, Paper 467, 1954) http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/467.

⁶¹ Holly Caldwell, "Orphanages and Orphans," *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, 2017, <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/orphanages-and-orphans/>.

⁶² It is important to note that this response to Yellow Fever was not isolated to Philadelphia, parishes across the country assisted in combating outbreaks of Yellow Fever as they occurred, with notable similarities happening in Louisiana.

The benefits of these reforms can be clearly seen when examining the response of the Catholic Church to the 1918 outbreak of Influenza. Like Black Death and the plagues before it, Influenza emerged somewhat mysteriously and killed on an unprecedented scale, but unlike the Black Death, it did not cause a disintegration of the Church. Christians and American Catholics specifically rallied around their communities and reached out to try to alleviate the suffering of those infected. This focus on supporting their communities was brought about in part by World War I and the sense that contributions small or large could help support troops overseas.⁶³ Catholic responses to Influenza were generally coordinated on a local level and were informed by national recommendations made by the Catholic War Council.

Of the many different local responses that occurred, the best known were the responses of nuns and lay Catholic women who volunteered their services as nurses in Influenza hospitals.⁶⁴ Across the country Bishops allowed Church buildings and facilities to be used as field hospitals, and un-cloistered nuns volunteered in mass to help care for the sick.⁶⁵ Most of these nuns did not have any formal medical schooling, but like the Christians of the second and third centuries, the basic nursing care they were able to provide saved lives. In Philadelphia in particular, this practice was crucial to the city's response to Influenza, as the archbishop allowed parish buildings to be used as hospitals,

⁶³ John M. Barry, *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History* (New York: Viking, 2004).

⁶⁴ Catholic Church Archdiocese of Philadelphia, *The Catholic Standard and Times*, October 12, 1918, v.23 edition, sec. no. 48.

⁶⁵ Mary Ann Thompson and Sara Bolten, "'They Buckled on the Armor of God': Kentucky Catholic Sister 'Nurses' in the 1918 Flu Pandemic," *American Catholic Studies* 129, no. 4 (2018): 91-105. doi:10.1353/acs.2018.0064.

brought in nuns from surrounding communities, and even found seminary students to volunteer to help bury the dead in order to relieve the pressure on the overwhelmed health department.⁶⁶ This cooperation with secular leaders allowed the Church to help not only their religious community but also their broader geographic community. However, this increase in scope meant that the church had to adapt to secular public health policies and find a way to worship and minister to the sick that was in keeping with the faith of its members and public health knowledge of the day.

Unlike Catholics during the Black Death, Catholics in the 1900s had access to a vast, and quickly growing array of scientific information. By the 1890s, germ theory had been widely accepted and people no longer looked at outbreaks of disease strictly as uncontrollable punishments from God.⁶⁷ Instead, disease was something that could be combated and even cured, with much lower mortality rates than those of past centuries. However, this new scientific understanding was often at odds with longstanding religious beliefs, and the consequences of this conflicting ideology played out during the outbreak of Influenza. As the flu spread, the Catholic Church grappled with how to adapt the in-person mass and service they believed to be necessary, with their new scientific knowledge that the flu was transmissible from person to person in close proximity. At first, the reactions of the Catholic clergy to public health recommendations such as canceling in-person mass were mixed, some parishes complied with recommendations

⁶⁶ Archdiocese of Philadelphia, “The Catholic Standard and Times.”

⁶⁷ “Joseph Lister's Antisepsis System,” *Science Museum*, October 14, 2018, <https://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/objects-and-stories/medicine/listers-antisepsis-system#:~:text=By%20the%201890s%2C%20wider%20acceptance,only%20way%20to%20control%20infection.>

and others did not.⁶⁸ In congregations where mass was canceled, there was outrage. However, as the outbreak continued it became clear to some that canceling mass was an important safety measure, causing many members of the clergy to reinterpret Canon 223 to justify postponing mass for the congregation's safety. Canon 223 states "In exercising their rights, the Christian faithful, both as individuals and gathered together in associations, must take into account the common good of the Church, the rights of others, and their own duties toward others. It also asserts that "In view of the common good, ecclesiastical authority can direct the exercise of rights which are proper to the Christian faithful."⁶⁹ Those clergymen who did chose to close churches for the pandemic argued that, because it was known that congregating in close quarters could spread the flu, meeting for mass acted against the common good and it was, therefore, the duty of the faithful to avoid doing so until the danger had passed.⁷⁰ This view established a historical precedent that has been used today during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Regardless of the challenges that worship during a pandemic posed, the involvement of many Catholics with the sick during an uncertain time, combined with a national emphasis on coming together as a community-led to a revival of the Catholic faith for many.⁷¹ Many who chose to care for the infected and survived looked back on their time as a sacred experience that brought them closer to God. When recounting their

⁶⁸ Archdiocese of Philadelphia, "The Catholic Standard and Times."

⁶⁹ "Code of Canon Law - Book II - The People of God - Part I. (Cann. 897 - 958)," *The Holy See*, Accessed April 14, 2021. http://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib2-cann208-329_en.html#TITLE_II.

⁷⁰ Cindy Wooden, Junno Arocho Esteves, and Angelus Staff, "What the Catholic Church Knows about Charity in the Time of Pandemic," *Angelus News*, March 20, 2020, <https://angelusnews.com/faith/conversion-in-a-time-of-coronavirus/>.

⁷¹ Barry, *The Great Influenza*.

experiences, nuns from multiple Philadelphia orders talked about the otherworldly visions their patients had, claiming to see angels or glimpses of heaven. Many sisters also recounted the feeling of love and contentment they felt when they were able to bring peace to the dying. For these women, and for others who chose to become involved the harrowing sights they witnessed increased their faith.⁷²

The rich history of a Christian and specifically Catholic response to disease and disaster now must bring us to the current COVID pandemic. In 2019, when the first reports of a novel coronavirus in China hit American news networks, there was not much of a reaction, with most people expecting the virus to disappear as quickly as it had seemingly appeared. However, the COVID virus proved to be more contagious and more deadly than originally thought, leaving the world facing a global pandemic two years later. In this time over 4.5 million people have already died globally, and the United States has almost over 650,000 deaths itself.⁷³ While these numbers are not as staggering as the more than 50 million deaths reported globally during the 1918 Influenza pandemic, they are nevertheless alarming, especially considering the advances that have been made in medicine.⁷⁴ Like many of the outbreaks of the near or distant past, COVID has caused panic and confusion but has also highlighted the Catholic church's continued commitment to ministering to the sick, much like Christians of old.

⁷² F. E. T., "Work of the Sisters During the Epidemic of Influenza, October, 1918." *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 30, no. 1 (1919): 25-63. Accessed September 23, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44208501>.

⁷³ As of September 1, 2021. "Coronavirus Cases," Worldmeters, accessed September 1, 2021, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>.

⁷⁴ "Influenza (flu)," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed September 1, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-commemoration/1918-pandemic-history.htm>.

As the COVID pandemic continues, the Church's response has been deeply rooted in Catholic social gospel at both the Vatican and local levels. At the Vatican level, Pope Francis has responded to the pandemic by releasing an encyclical entitled *Fratelli Tutti* or Brothers All to encourage religious toleration, cooperation, and a move towards equality as society deals with and recovers from COVID. In this letter, Pope Francis points out how the pandemic has impacted marginalized communities and the elderly at a higher rate, discussing the ventilator shortages in Italy and the politicization that COVID caused in the United States. Francis then encourages people not to be selfish and focus on superficial dividing lines in society, but to reach out to each other and find forgiveness and community. This emphasis on reaching out and developing solidarity plays out as a modern interpretation of the community outreach popularized by early Christians and it is the hope of many that it will result in a stronger church when the pandemic is over.⁷⁵

At the local level of a diocese, or even an individual parish, the clergy have focused on adhering to safety guidelines and on community outreach, building on the public health foundations established during the Influenza pandemic of 1918. Like the clergy of that era, many bishops have used Canon 223 to justify halting in-person mass, but unlike the clergy of the past, these bishops now have access to Zoom, Skype, and YouTube and have been able to rethink what it means to be connected to their congregations, providing pastoral care without endangering anyone.⁷⁶ Furthermore, many

⁷⁵ Pope Francis, "Fratelli Tutti," *The Holy See*, October 3, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

⁷⁶ "Arise: Restoring Catholic Life after the Pandemic," Archdiocese of Philadelphia, Accessed March 18, 2021, <http://archphila.org/arise/>.

dioceses have embraced the science behind public health measures more readily than before, with the Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend even lending his help to a Catholic Newspaper to create an article entitled *Faith and Common Sense*, instructing the faithful on how to safely have mass, and instructing them to care for the sick.⁷⁷ This embrace of science and new technology has allowed Catholics to continue the tradition of caring for the sick, and even broader society, in a way that is significantly safer than it has been in previous outbreaks. This well-coordinated, mindful approach of the Catholic Church has been met with mixed responses, with some praising the Church for considering science and safety, and others saying that things like Zoom meetings cheapen their religious experience.

This plague, like others of antiquity has also left many with room for theological reflection, with Catholic scholars reflecting on what blessing can be found in the pandemic and considering what going back to church after the pandemic will look like. Many seem to agree with Pope Francis that the post-pandemic return to normalcy cannot be a return to the inequities of the past, but in the midst of the pandemic, many are still trying to figure out how to grow and maintain their community.

⁷⁷ Gretchen R. Crowe, *Faith and Common Sense: The Catholic Response to an Epidemic* (Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 2020).

CHAPTER THREE

Social Teachings in the Catholic Church

As part of an emphasis on community, the Catholic Church has a long tradition of applying religious principles to social life. Examples of how to treat the poor and the sickly were central to Jesus' ministry and to the ministries of his later apostles.¹ These teachings informed the actions and organization of many groups in the early church and were, by and large, the cause of the pattern of outreach and growth discussed in the second chapter. Today this consistent ethic for life can be recognized as social teaching. This modern iteration of a doctrine of care for and outreach to the less fortunate was not recognized as Catholic social teaching in the Church until the late 1800s, but the foundational ideas and doctrine are much older. It is generally agreed that a unified ethic of social teaching became widely recognized as such on May 15, 1891, when Pope Leo XIII issued an encyclical called *Rerum Novarum*. This encyclical addressed the struggle of the working class during the Industrial Revolution and emphasized the rights of workers. This document was somewhat remarkable when it was published, as it demonstrated Leo's social and political beliefs. In the encyclical, the Church takes on multiple economic systems, including capitalism and socialism, focusing on how society ought to treat people based on rights the Church asserted every human being possessed.

¹ Mt. 8:16, 12:15, 14:14; Mk. 7:37, 16:17-18; Acts 4:22.

This document lent support to certain Catholic social movements at the time and created the framework for modern iterations of Catholic social teaching.¹

Because *Rerum Novarum* plays such an important role as the foundation of modern Catholic social teaching, it is important to understand the Pope who wrote it. Leo, known as Vincenzo Gioacchino Pecci before his papal reign, was born to a less prominent noble family and was educated for a career in the church from his youth. Pecci had an aptitude for church affairs, and quickly advanced to an appointment as nuncio to Brussels. Pecci was also consecrated as an archbishop during his time as nuncio, but he quickly fell out of favor with King Leopold I and his peers. Several people suspected he had liberal sympathies because he explored the benefits that a parliamentary system and freedom of the press could have for Catholics. Because of this, Leopold demanded Pecci be recalled to Rome and Pecci spent the following 32 years as Bishop of Perugia. Even though this was considered by many to be a demotion, Pecci used this time to study Christian philosophy and promote the intellectual improvement of himself and his clergy. Of particular interest to Pecci were the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, which in part helped shape his growing opinion that Church leaders were making a mistake in how they were handling the science, politics, and aspirations of society at the time. Pecci expressed these thoughts in several of his pastoral letters, gaining him a broader audience and the support of many non-Italian Cardinals. This resulted in his election as Pope Leo XIII in 1878. Leo's reign was distinctly different than his predecessor, Pope Pius IX because, even though they both critiqued liberalism and advocated for the centralized power of the

¹ D. M. Hughes and B. Jordan, Catholic social Teachings call to the dignity of creation, *National Catholic Reporter*, May 13, 2016, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/justice/catholic-social-teachings-call-dignity-creation>

Vatican, Leo was willing to approach civil governments with diplomacy and was sympathetic to scientific progress. Leo was also concerned with renewing dialogue within the church, as well as encouraging the laity to engage with non-Catholics. It is from this set of beliefs that *Rerum Novarum* was created as Leo advocated for the Church and state to find a way to coexist and openly supported the working class, creating a new framework for believers to approach the world with.²

Focusing specifically on the content of this encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* or of new things; a title that perfectly encompasses the message and the implications it had when it was written. In the encyclical, Leo speaks to the emerging trends of globalization and the increasing isolation and marginalization faced by the working class.³ Leo speaks of a “spirit of revolutionary change” that spurs on changes in the political and economic world and therefore requires a response from the church. Leo's response to these issues is unmistakably clear, he asserts that there is a duty of “Christian charity” to care for the poor and ensure that the rights of the working class are maintained. He critiques current systems of capitalism for leaving the workers unable to provide for themselves despite their keen efforts and points out the injustice of a system that preys upon the workers' labor and humanity. However, Leo is also highly critical of socialism or other newer forms of government that he saw as related to secular liberalism. Specifically, he condemns socialism, saying that taking away personal property as a means of caring for

² R. Aubert, "Leo XIII." Encyclopedia Britannica, July 16, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Leo-XIII>.

³ D. M. Hughes and B. Jordan, *Catholic Social Teachings*.

the poor is a flawed method that is directly contrary to the natural rights of humankind.⁴ Even as Leo is challenging the economic and social systems of the day, he is also intentionally constructing a new social ethic for the faithful. This ethic, according to a chaplain at St. Francis College, Brian Jordan, would have been seen as revisionist instead of radical, and that would have addressed the many issues Leo was witnessing. As part of this construction, Leo explains the duties of an employer to their workers, the duties of a government to their people, and the obligations of the church to the poor. This encyclical changed how many Catholic clergy and laity viewed their role in society, and it reframed caring for the poor or advocating for the rights of others as a moral imperative for the faithful.⁵ It is from this newly recognized moral imperative, that Catholic social teaching emerged.

Though Leo is credited with sparking modern social teaching, he was not the first to consider the implications of the Christian faith on social actions. Many theologians had been considering ideas that would eventually become a part of Catholic social teaching since the first few centuries. Many modern theologians credit the work of Saint Aquinas as the primary source of Catholic social teaching, something that seems unsurprising given Leo's particular dedication to his writings. In his life, Aquinas focused on living morally in a way that exemplified the cardinal virtues, including justice. In his writings, Aquinas shows a sensitivity to humankind that does not reduce humanity to a few broad generalizations, but instead recognizes the rational nature of human beings. It is from this

⁴ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, encyclical letter, *The Holy See*, May 15, 1891, http://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.pdf.

⁵ D. M. Hughes and B. Jordan, *Catholic Social Teachings*.

principal recognition that much of what would become social teaching emerged. According to scholars including Duke Professor Gerard Bradley and Seminary Professor E. Christian Brugger, this influence can be seen throughout *Rerum Novarum*, as Leo repeatedly references the writings of Aquinas, discussing his definition of mutual charity, considering his positions on private ownership, and more generally agreeing with his conceptions of justice as part of his rationale for defining the faithful's duty to the poor.⁶ In many ways, the ideas of Aquinas were utilized by Leo to create a social philosophy that would address the social ills of his time, creating a set of principles that is still relevant over a century later.

Beyond the teachings of Aquinas, there are other important events that demonstrate the Church's commitment to community care. After the Black Death and Protestant Reformation highlighted many of the issues within the Church, the Council of Trent was convened to put a clear emphasis on reeducating priests on their pastoral duties to their communities.⁷ Many of the decisions made at the council reinforced the importance of community in the Church and reaffirmed a priest's duty to care for his parish and foster a sense of community in that parish, demonstrating the importance of social interactions to the Catholic faith. An emphasis on social involvement continued to be prominent in the Church well beyond the Council of Trent, and the growth of the Catholic Church in what would become the United States of America presents several examples of this. Beyond the care provided and orphanages created by Philadelphia

⁶ Gerard V. Bradley and E. Christian Brugger, *Catholic Social Teaching: A Volume of Scholarly Essays* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁷ V.U. Iheanacho, "Care of souls and the logic of Trent as a pastoral council." *Acta Theologica* 39 (2019): 94-109.

Catholics in response to Yellow Fever, Catholics in North America tended to become involved in the welfare of almost every community they were a part of.⁸ A good example of this can be found in 1727 in New Orleans when a group of Catholic nuns helped found Charity Hospital at the request of the local health department.⁹ All of these examples predate Leo's encyclical but are clearly influenced by a similar focus on community and care, looking at the Church and the faithful as an active social unit. These beliefs were key to many and were easily unified into a more consistent ethic of social teaching as time progressed.

To easily explain social teaching, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) outlined seven key themes within the umbrella of social teaching that are meant to summarize its core tenants. These themes are meant to illustrate how a believer should address the challenges of the modern world while still living a moral life, and they provide a helpful framework for analyzing the application of social teaching to disease response. The first of these themes, and arguably one of the most relevant to this discussion, is a focus on preserving the life and dignity of the human person. The Church asserts that the modern world is plagued by materialism and declining respect for human life; a situation that is in direct conflict with the Church's view that preserving human life is the sacred foundation of a moral and just society. This first tenant of social teaching is foundational to understanding the remaining themes, and the USCCB frames it as such.

⁸ For a more detailed explanation of Catholic involvement during Philadelphia's Yellow Fever outbreaks, see chapter two.

⁹ G. Niebuhr, "Catholic leaders' Dilemma: Abortion vs. universal care," *New York Times*, August 25, 1994, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/08/25/us/health-care-debate-catholic-church-catholic-leaders-dilemma-abortion-vs.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

Without a shared understanding that every human life is precious to God, the Catholic Church cannot prescribe any kind of moral social action.¹⁰ This view clearly echoes the ideas Leo expressed in *Rerum Novarum* and earlier iterations of this can be seen in previous Christian responses to disease.¹¹

The remaining themes of the social teaching build on the first and include both a call for strong family and community groups, as well as encouragement for the laity to participate in the enactment of their rights and responsibilities as Catholic members of society. These two themes, a call to families and communities to strengthen ties, and a focus on the rights and responsibilities of the faithful, both reflect the necessarily communal aspects of social teaching. The Church proclaims that the only way to combat the dehumanizing individualism that is common in the modern world is to reinforce the family as the central unit of social life and to recommit to community involvement. The Church's stance is that individuals find fulfillment in community and that it is the duty of all to participate in society and contribute to the common good. This focus clearly illustrates that care and belief are social activities that require a network of believers. Here, it seems clear that the Church recognizes the importance of a robust community, not only for preserving the church but also for creating effective social responses. In their explanation of these tenants, the Church reaffirms their consistent ethic for life and explains that it is the responsibility of all to ensure that the rights necessary to embrace this ethic are accessible to everyone.¹² Again, the actions of the Christian faithful from

¹⁰ "Sharing catholic social teaching: Challenges and directions," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed March 01, 2021, <https://www.usccb.org/resources/sharing-catholic-social-teaching-challenges-and-directions>.

¹¹ Consider the actions of Saint Cyprian or Saint Roch detailed in Chapter 2.

¹² USCCB, "Sharing catholic social teaching."

previous centuries mirror these ideas, providing examples of a communal commitment to care and human life during sickness and health.

Furthermore, Catholic social teaching focus on the importance of caring for the poor and affirming the dignity and rights of the working class.¹³ The Church recognizes the growing inequalities between the poor and the wealthy and urges people to reach out to the poor as a moral duty. The Church also emphasizes the rights of workers, saying that in order to preserve human dignity, people must have the right to productive work, fair wages, and private property. This focus on mutual charity and preserving private property echoes the ideas Aquinas espoused centuries before and is in keeping with Leo's critique of economic systems, demonstrating continuity of belief in the Catholic Church. This continuity demonstrates that some of the same foundational principles that influence social teaching now may have also influenced early clergy as they made decisions about how to care for the sick during previous pandemics. A specific example of this can be seen in the writings of Dionysius during the Plague of Cyprian when he urged the wealthy members of his community to give up some of their wealth and donate it to caring for those afflicted.¹⁴ While Dionysius may not have conceived of this as establishing a consistent social ethic, he is nonetheless advocating for the care of the poor in a way that suggests his understanding of what the Christian response to disease ought to be is fairly consistent with how it is understood in the modern day.

¹³ USCCB, "Sharing catholic social teaching."

¹⁴ Matthew Namee, "St. Dionysius on the Epidemic of Alexandria," *The Society for Orthodox Christian History in the Americas*, March 16, 2020, <https://orthodoxhistory.org/2020/03/16/st-dionysius-on-the-epidemic-of-alexandria/>.

Finally, the last two themes that the USCCB considers central to Catholic social teaching are solidarity among the peoples and an emphasis on caring for God’s creations. The Church urges its members to resist the trend towards selfishness, and instead look outside of themselves to recognize those around them as their brothers and sisters. By calling believers to recognize the entire human race as a family, the church calls on believers to humanize those they might otherwise consider to be other from them. This call for solidarity is necessary to fulfil the tenants of social teaching discussed thus far because, without this mutual care, it would be difficult to foster empathy between members of the Church. This empathy is not only necessary to satisfy the other themes of the social teaching, but it is also required to fulfil the final theme of caring for God’s creation, Earth, as a means of respect to God and as the ultimate way to care for one's neighbor.¹⁵ This focus on selflessness and connectivity has been present in many ways throughout the Church's history beyond its introduction in *Rerum Novarum*. A prime example of this can be seen in the response of the archdiocese of Philadelphia to Yellow Fever, discussed in the previous chapter.¹⁶ This case is one of many that can be highlighted when examining social behaviors of the Catholic Church pre-*Rerum Novarum* and further demonstrates a continuity of belief in social care.

Given the evidence that a consistent ethic of community focused care as a key part of Catholic disease responses throughout history, it is important to consider the Church's COVID response as modern iteration or continuation of principles that have

¹⁵ USCCB, “Sharing catholic social teaching.”

¹⁶ When the Philadelphia health department failed to care for the massive influx of sick and dying, local Catholic parishes and priests stepped up to fill in the gaps, caring for the infected regardless of religion.

long held a prominent place in Catholic theology. The same values that motivated early Christians to care for their pagan neighbors even with the potential risk to their own lives, are quite similar to those exemplified by Leo. With this in mind, one can utilize an understanding of social teaching to analyze how Catholic leaders considered the societal impacts of disease and sought to remedy those ills, as well as care for individual sick people. When looking through this lens, a pattern of thinking emerges where clergy urge believers to embrace the better parts of their human nature and embody several of the themes of the social teaching, including an emphasis on solidarity, community involvement, and the preservation of life. Comparing the responses of the Church to COVID and to the 1918 outbreak of Influenza can illustrate how this modern pattern has evolved and established itself.

Looking first to the Church's response to Influenza, it is important to understand how ideas very similar to social teaching were already being used as reason for community outreach, especially in the United States.¹⁷ American Catholics demonstrated a commitment to community care consistent with what would become social teaching even before Leo's *Rerum Novarum*, as evidenced by a growing network of Catholic Hospitals and orphanages all over the United States. From 1828 to 1860, the Sisters of Charity alone established 18 hospitals in 10 states, leaving a permanent mark on the healthcare system. Even more intriguing, Catholic nuns took on nursing roles so often that they are credited with profoundly influencing how secular nurses are taught and how

¹⁷ The 1918 outbreak of influenza is also commonly called Spanish Flu; however, this name is misleading about the origins of the outbreak and was/still is considered somewhat offensive. To avoid using the term Spanish Flu, the 1918 outbreak will be referred to as Influenza for the rest of this work.

they practice, even today. Nuns around the country created and staffed hospitals, routinely responding to outbreaks of disease with a special focus on treating poor patients that could not afford private medical care.¹⁸ These local-level solutions brought communities together and established a precedent for Catholic involvement that would become quite important during the Influenza outbreak of 1918 and beyond.

While the actions of Catholic communities before 1891 provide numerous examples of community focused behavior in keeping with later teaching, analyzing the response to Influenza allows for an analysis of newer, *Rerum Novarum* influenced social doctrine as it pertains to disease response directly. In the case of Influenza, to understand how social teaching was interpreted regarding disease, Influenza must be understood within the context of World War I and how the Pope responded. The Pope during both the pandemic and much of the war was Pope Benedict XV. Benedict found himself in an unprecedented situation and he chose a nuanced stance on the war; avoiding condemning one side or the other and instead trying to reduce unnecessary suffering by being a staunch advocate for peace. During the early war, Benedict attempted to act as a mediator, but he was unsuccessful and was left out of formal peace talks at the end of the war.¹⁹

Even though Benedict failed in his aim to bring about global peace, he did lead several successful humanitarian efforts and he instituted a new Code of Canon law that would be instrumental to some Catholic priests when deciding to enforce Influenza safety

¹⁸ Barbra Mann Wall, "American Catholic Nursing. An Historical Analysis," *Medizinhistorisches Journal* 47, no. 2/3 (2012): 160-75. Accessed March 4, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24573289>.

¹⁹ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Benedict XV," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 18, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Benedict-XV>.

measures for their parishes. Throughout his papacy, Benedict focused on building relationships, easing suffering, and maintaining peace - diplomatic achievements that Leo would likely have been supportive of or at least sympathetic to. After the war Benedict devoted his time to mission work and built relationships with as many nations as possible, creating a framework to try to heal the social and religious divides World War I had created in Europe. It is reasonable to assume that Benedict was keenly aware of the ethic that had been established by his recent predecessor, Leo XIII, as his actions exemplified a commitment to solidarity and care for the poor. As Benedict strengthened the influence of the Vatican and worked tirelessly to bring aid to those who needed it most, he modeled selfless behavior, even in complex situations. With rebuilding and maintaining peaceful relationships as his primary focus, Benedict was unable to emphasize the growing Influenza pandemic even as it eventually led to his death in 1922.²⁰

Even though Benedict was unable to address Influenza with the full focus of the papal throne, many among the local clergy, especially those in the United States, were able to make addressing Influenza a top priority. When the United States entered World War I, American Bishops convened to create a Catholic War council, with the aim of unifying Catholic-American support for the war effort in a way that was in keeping with Catholic moral values.²¹ Before the outbreak of Influenza, the Catholic War Council focused on generating Catholic support for the war effort, providing religious support for

²⁰ "Benedict XV," Papal Artifacts, accessed March 02, 2021, <https://www.papalartifacts.com/portfolio-item/pope-benedict-xv/>.

²¹ Cardinal Dolan, "The formation of the National Catholic War Council, the origin of the USCCB," *Catholic New York*, November 14, 2017, <https://cny.org/stories/the-formation-of-the-national-catholic-war-councilthe-origin-of-the-usccb,16440>.

American soldiers, and lobbying for Catholic interests nationally. However, as World War I came to a close and Influenza began to spread, the National Catholic War Council evolved to become the National Catholic Welfare Council, keeping the group together with the aim of being able to coordinate Catholic responses and represent Catholic interests at the national level. The new council, hereafter referred to as the NCWC, quickly embraced the ideas of social teaching and released a plan for reconstructing America after the war called the Bishops Program for Social Reconstruction. Among other things, this plan called for better access to healthcare and government insurance for the sick and poor. While this program received some pushback for being too radical, it made the general position of American Bishops clear, it was the duty of Catholics and the nation to better care for their sick and poor.²²

This unified embrace of social teaching and its relevant application to healthcare informed the Catholic response to the pandemic that had already begun to sweep the globe. In most dioceses where there were cases of Influenza, nuns were mobilized to care for the sick and Catholic communities responded similarly to the pattern of care established in chapter two.²³ However, a new Catholic response, one directly related to the NCWC's understanding of social teaching was also observed. While it was common for nuns to get involved in the care of the sick, a Catholic social order, called the Knights of Columbus (KOC) also notably got involved in caring for Influenza patients. The KOC had been an important group in supporting the formation of the National Catholic War Council and had staffed many of the Catholic church's recreation huts for soldiers during

²² Maria Mazzenga, "The Archivist's Nook: A Rocky Road to Reconstruction," *The Catholic University of America*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.lib.cua.edu/wordpress/newsevents/tag/rerum-novarum/>.

²³ For a more detailed description of nuns working to fight the Influenza pandemic, see chapter 1.

World War I. As a result, when Influenza began to spread among the ranks of American troops, members of the KOC were in a prime position to lend their support. While some members of the KOC assisted nuns in providing nursing care, they also tried to maintain a community for sick soldiers confined to their bases, doing whatever they could to ease suffering and bolster morale. The KOC also helped local parishes utilize national Catholic resources and connected members of the community so they could best support the sick. Many nuns and nurses at the time praised the mobilization efforts of the KOC, suggesting that they would not have been able to help as many people without their efforts.²⁴

The actions of the NCWS and KOC at a national level combined with local efforts to treat the sick, clearly convey an American interpretation of Catholic social teaching. During Influenza, American Catholics were able to take their recently formed social orders and reach out to their communities, embodying the ideas expressed in *Rerum Novarum*. In many ways, it can be argued that civil society was renovated, by Christian institutions just as Leo had argued it should be.²⁵ This social organization and outreach resulted in a healing and revitalization of communities that was remarkable at the time. This created a framework that American Catholics have built on during this current COVID pandemic.

However, it is important to recognize that American Catholics were not the only ones to respond to the pandemic; Catholics around the world reacted to the disease by caring for the sick in a pattern similar to the one discussed in chapter two. These global

²⁴ Cecilia Hadley, "Knights and the Spanish flu," *The Knights of Columbus*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.kofc.org/en/news-room/columbia/2020/may/knights-spanish-flu.html>.

²⁵ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*.

responses to Influenza illustrate principles of social teaching, implemented in the form of an emphasis on community and engagement, and organization into groups to help the sick and impoverished. As in America, churches all over Europe attempted to implement public health measures, and the German Catholic Church also organized to train women as nurses.²⁶ As the pandemic grew worse, many members of the clergy began to realize that it would be a greater act of charity to close churches until the pandemic was under control. This realization led to local congregations utilizing Benedict's new Code of Canon Law to create a religious rationale for closing churches and cooperating with public health officials. Bishops like Cardinal John J. Glennon used Canon 223 and 920 to argue the notion that parishioners would not be spiritually harmed by missing communion in the short term so that the sickness could be contained.²⁷ Canon 223 asserted that parishioners had to act for the common good of the church, and Canon 920 addressed concerns about the Eucharist saying: after being initiated into the Most Holy Eucharist, each of the faithful is obliged to receive holy communion at least once a year. This precept must be fulfilled during the Easter season unless it is fulfilled for a just cause at another time during the year.²⁸ This action also demonstrates an embrace of social teaching, albeit, in a different way, as many members of the clergy emphasized the

²⁶ Jonathan D. Quick, "What We Can Learn From the 20th Century's Deadliest Pandemic," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-we-can-learn-from-the-20th-century-s-deadliest-pandemic-11583510468>.

²⁷ Jennifer Brinker, "Examples in History Point to Catholics Who Have Been Deprived the Eucharist in Times of Hardship," *Archdiocese of St Louis*, accessed March 17, 2021, <https://www.archstl.org/examples-in-history-point-to-catholics-who-have-been-deprived-the-eucharist-in-times-of-hardship-5238>.

²⁸ For quote of Canon 223, see chapter 2
"Code of Canon Law - Book IV - The Function of the Church - Part I. (Cann. 920)," *The Holy See*, accessed September 23, 2020. http://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib4-cann879-958_en.html.

importance of preserving a temporary physical disconnect as an act of brotherly love that would protect the greater community. This attitude likely saved many lives and provided a precedent for closing churches or altering mass during COVID.

However, before a complete discussion of how social teaching has informed responses to COVID can be had, it is important to note the many historical changes that have occurred between the publication of *Rerum Novarum*, the subsequent Influenza outbreak, and the present day. In the almost 100-year interim between pandemics, much has been done to advance social teaching, and several factions surrounding these ideas have formed. One evolution of social teaching that is important to note here is that of Liberation Theology, a more complex and political approach to social teaching that has indirectly informed the current pope's response to COVID. Sometimes considered radical, Liberation Theology focuses on marginalized communities, seeking to aid the poor and oppressed not just through religious organizations, but through political involvement and activism.²⁹ Liberation Theology and social teaching assigns the idea of sin to socioeconomic structures that create inequality, and in these theological frameworks, it is the role of every believer to work to change these structures in various ways.

The emergence of what is traditionally considered Liberation Theology occurred in 20th Century Latin America where several countries were undergoing civil unrest and

²⁹ Anthony B. Bradley, "Liberation Theology," *Oxford Bibliographies in African American Studies*, June 2016, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190280024/obo-9780190280024-0019.xml>.

many members of the working class were being exploited.³⁰ These feelings were crystalized into a response that would be considered the birth of Liberation Theology when, in 1968, the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops convened to discuss the application of Vatican II in Latin America.³¹ This discussion resulted in a statement asserting that industrial capitalism enriched the developed West at the expense of the non-European poor through long-term exploitation of their labor and resources. This bold statement encouraged leaders of the movement to try to establish small groups of adherents in each community, with the goal of these groups to engage in religious activism and provide services to the poor. In addition, leaders of the movement were openly critical of some aspects of the traditional Latin American Church, especially the wealthy and elite, accusing them of being complicit in exploitation. This accusation, coupled with the certain factions within the movement trending towards increasingly leftist and socialist views, caused the Vatican to condemn aspects of the movement and try to suppress forms of Liberation Theology that aligned themselves with Marxist views.³² For many outside of Latin America, the movement seemed too political and at times too aligned with socialism, an economic system that Leo himself critiqued as an ineffective response to capitalism in *Rerum Novarum*. However, those involved in the

³⁰ While it is not germane to the topics in this thesis, it is also important to note the there was an emergence of Protestant Black Liberation Theology that occurred in the United States at around the same time.

³¹ Valiente, O. Ernesto, "The Reception of Vatican II in Latin America," *Theological Studies* 73, no. 4 (December 2012): 795–823, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056391207300403>.

³² Bovone, Alberto, and Ratzinger, Joseph Cardinal, "Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith." Vatican City: The Holy See, 1984, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html.

movement believe that Liberation Theology is inherently biblical, asserting that Christianity requires believers to support the poor and oppose oppressive political or economic systems because the Bible condemns those who gain wealth at the expense of the poor.³³

This discourse has continued into the present day, with some contemporary scholars, such as Michael Kirwan, asserting that the beliefs of Liberation Theology are widely compatible with the mainstream beliefs of social teaching. This idea is not unique, when the Latin American Bishops met in 1968, they created a framework that would support liberation theologies in an attempt to respond to Vatican recommendations.³⁴ Their response was rooted in their interpretation of social teaching, and many of the ideas that have emerged in Latin America afterwards, such as advocacy for a preferential option for the poor and an alignment of the church with the people, are ideas that are easily compatible with social teaching.³⁵ This compatibility has been highlighted by proponents of the movement, such as Romero, and Kirwan argues that what Liberation Theology declares boldly, social teaching affirms implicitly. Asserting that there is a fundamental incompatibility between modern capitalism and the Christian gospel. Kirwan also posits that in many ways social teaching and Liberation Theology are proclaiming the same message under different circumstances, Liberation Theology for those who have faced continuous oppression, and social teaching for those in more

³³ Bradley, "Liberation Theology."

³⁴ Theologies plural here to express the notion that there is not one unified doctrine of Liberation Theologies and there are several factions or theologies that fall under the umbrella term, Liberation Theology

³⁵ Valiente, "The Reception of Vatican II in Latin America."

comfortable circumstances.³⁶ While there is still an ongoing debate surrounding this idea, the claim Kirwan puts forward is compelling. Both Liberation Theology and social teaching declare care for the poor as a moral duty and the obligation of the faithful. Both belief systems also put a high emphasis on human dignity and community care, ideas that, as has already been discussed, have been present in the Church from its inception. The Vatican under Pope Francis has been more conciliatory towards proponents of liberation theology in recent years as arguably, the pope is a proponent of a form of Liberation Theology known as Theology of the People³⁷. In early 2019, Francis reflected on the reconciliation that had taken place between himself, and a Father of Liberation Theology, Gustavo Gutierrez, saying that they had been able to celebrate mass together.³⁸ This more conciliatory attitude towards Liberation Theology seems to be related, in part, to Francis's embrace of Catholic social teaching and his general focus on fraternity and the rights of the poor, demonstrating the close association between the two doctrines. This change in positioning coupled with an overall evolution of the Church since *Rerum Novarum* is key to understanding the Church's response to COVID, a concept that will be further explored in the next chapter.

³⁶ Michael Kirwan, "Liberation Theology and Catholic Social Teaching," *New Blackfriars* 93, no. 1044 (2012): 246-58. Accessed July 30, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43251618>.

³⁷ SCanone, Juan Carlos, "Pope Francis and the Theology of the People," *Theological Studies* 77, no. 1 (2016): 118-35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563915621141>.

³⁸ Cindy Wooden, "Pope Reflects on Changed Attitudes toward Liberation Theology," *The Crux*, February 14, 2019, <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2019/02/pope-reflects-on-changed-attitudes-toward-liberation-theology/>.

CHAPTER FOUR

National and International Responses to COVID

In order to understand the Catholic Church's national and international response to COVID, the response must be understood in the context of Catholic social teaching and the influence of the current pope. To best understand the influence Pope Francis has had on this response, one must first examine his policies, inclinations, and what shaped them. Francis was born Jorge Mario Bergoglio in Argentina, and he is a pope of many firsts, including the first pope from South America and the first Jesuit pope.¹ He also pursued a career outside of the church briefly during his young adult life, a trait not entirely unique to him, but still one that sets him apart from a significant portion of his predecessors. As a child, Bergoglio grew up as a child of immigrant parents, and his family relied on the church for social and financial support. This reliance and a complex mix of social, political, and familial pressures seemed to call Bergoglio to the church and to politically motivated service.²

The first signs of Francis' later beliefs can be seen in his membership to a chapter of Catholic Action, a Catholic group that opposed certain radical political views and

¹ M. Stefon, "Francis," Encyclopedia Britannica, December 13, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Francis-I-pope>.

² Nick Miroff, "You Can't Understand Pope Francis Without Juan Peron - and Evita," August 1, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/you-cant-understand-pope-francis-without-juan-peron--and-evita/2015/08/01/d71e6fa4-2fd0-11e5-a879-213078d03dd3_story.html.

attempted to protect the rights of the church from these views.¹ Bergoglio was a member during a time of political unrest and upheaval in Argentina, and his membership would have been associated with politicians like Juan Peron who advocated for strong regimes that helped the poor. This association would eventually lead to an evolution in the ideas of Catholic Action groups that would transform these groups into advocates for ideas central to those of Liberation Theology.² These ideas, specifically a type of Liberation Theology popular in Argentina at the time known as “theology of the people,” influenced Bergoglio during his formative years and some aspects of them can be seen in his later religious work.³

Before he was pope, Bergoglio served as superior to the Jesuits of Argentina, and he had to navigate the complex politics of a military coup and ensuing civil war during his service. Bergoglio was appointed archbishop of Buenos Aires in 1998, where he served during Argentina’s economic crisis.⁴ It was during this time as Archbishop that Bergoglio focused on an inner-city ministry and worked closely with clergy who were influenced by the Argentine theology of the people. Among other things, this theology advocated for the rights of the poor and put an emphasis on the people of the church and their faith. This brand of Liberation Theology was more removed from Marxism than other factions, and Bergoglio even took the opportunity to publicly introduce works from the movement’s leaders during his time as Archbishop. The influence of this theology can

¹ Miroff, “You Can’t Understand Pope Francis.”

² Ana Maria Bidegain, “From Catholic Action to Liberation Theology: The Historical Process of the Laity in Latin America in the Twentieth Century,” *The Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies*, 48, 1985.

³ SCanone, “Pope Francis and the Theology of the People.”

⁴ Stefon, “Francis.”

be seen in many of his publications and forms part of the perspective Francis brings to the papacy.⁵ This influence appears to be highly compatible with the principles of social teaching, and it was during the economic crisis that Bergoglio's staunch support of social teaching or the theology of the people *and* theological conservatism became very apparent. Bergoglio set himself apart by living humbly and tirelessly advocating for the poor, but he also became quite involved in Argentinian politics. Bergoglio's engagement with Argentinian politics made enemies, as he opposed the more liberal social policies of the left-leaning presidential administrations, while simultaneously attacking capitalism and advocating for the rights of the poor.⁶

This willingness to have strong political opinions, and openly condemn the leadership of his home country is a trait that Francis brought with him to the papacy and one that sets him apart from Pope Benedict XV during Influenza.⁷ While Benedict seems to have seen the tense political situation in Europe during the first world war as a reason to tread lightly during his reign, Francis does not seem to view political or social tensions as a reason to shy away from certain topics or advocacy. This attitude is perhaps evidence of the influence that Liberation Theology and political unrest had on Francis during his earlier life, and it has been a force for change within the Vatican.⁸ From the beginning of his papacy, Francis has called for a revitalization of the Church, with an increased focus on social teaching and the plight of the poor.⁹ He has further elaborated on this position

⁵ SCanone, "Pope Francis and the Theology of the People."

⁶ Stefon, "Francis."

⁷ See Chapter 3 for a more detailed explanation of Benedict's response to Influenza.

⁸ Even though Francis himself is not a proponent of Liberation Theology, as previously discussed, many argue that he was influenced by the same socio-political conditions that gave rise to the theology.

⁹ Stefon, M. "Francis."

in two of his major encyclicals, *Laudato Si* written before the outbreak of COVID, and *Fratelli Tutti* written after and in part responding to COVID.

Fratelli Tutti especially makes clear the link between the Church's response to COVID and social teaching. Channeling his namesake, Saint Francis of Assisi, Francis calls on humanity to look at one another with a kind of universal fraternity that would empower the Church to transform society after the pandemic. In this encyclical, Francis does not shy away from condemning the politicization of the pandemic or the policies that led to needless deaths and a lack of healthcare resources. He speaks out against wasteful consumption and questions the morality of a society that closes itself off to immigrants, does not aid the poor, and does not provide universal human rights. In many ways his message calls the public to investigate themselves and recognize their flaws, reaching out to both believers and nonbelievers alike. Referencing the parable of the Good Samaritan, Francis reminds the Church that a believer may be untrue to everything that his faith demands of him, and yet think he is close to God and better than others. With this illustration, Francis calls on believers to act as their faith dictates and embrace a robust social approach, clearly echoing his predecessor Leo and demonstrating a consistent ethic for life.¹⁰ The ultimate goal of the encyclical seems to be to illustrate the need for society to come together and highlight the folly of continuing on the current course.

Influenced by Francis, the Vatican has responded to the COVID pandemic by focusing on community and pastoral care. In March of 2020, as the death toll was

¹⁰ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, encyclical letter, *The Holy See*, October 3, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_ enciclica-fratelli-tutti.pdf.

steadily rising, Francis asked the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development to create a commission on COVID in order to understand who was being impacted by the pandemic and how the church could respond. The findings and recommendations of the commission demonstrate the Church's commitment to social teaching as laid out in *Rerum Novarum* and reemphasized in *Fratelli tutti*. In the report, members of the commission call for a future shaped by a combination of science and theological reflection focused on improving the lives of those most neglected by society. Specifically, the commission lays out a timeline with five areas for action that will lead the church towards a better future not only for believers but for all humanity.¹¹

The five action areas, or working groups, focus on acting now and implementing creative solutions to help build a better future while trying to communicate hope, foster dialogue, and support access to healthcare. The goal of the commission was to work in tandem with the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals long-term and create a usable framework for their short-term timeline. As part of this goal, the commission laid out four stages to be started in March 2020 to be and fully implemented by May 2021.¹² The four stages are divided into startup, strategy, action, and transformation and each stage embodies the goals of social teaching on a different level. The commission determined that in order for their strategy to be deemed a success, it had to accomplish four things. At the end of May 2021, the commission wished to see the

¹¹ “2020 Year in Review Vatican COVID Commission Preparing the Future,” *Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development COVID Vatican Commission*, 2020, 1–16.

¹² As of September 1, 2021, the COVID commission has not released an official update pertaining to the delta variant of COVID-19. Because no official update has been released the next section will proceed with information available a fall back on what has already been published when more recent information is lacking.

position of local churches strengthened allowing them to better lead and serve, increased coordination on messaging to better mobilize action, the creation of multi-year church commitments with adequate resources and planning, and increased collaboration and coordination internally.¹³

If the commission has succeeded in implementing its recommendations, the Catholic Church will be posed for a period of integration between local and Vatican level authorities and for the development of new ways to communicate with and aid communities in need. However, even if they have fallen short, the fact that such a commission was created in order to address the social impacts of the COVID pandemic illustrates how deeply rooted in social teaching the international response has been under Francis. The commission's numerous efforts include dedicating a team to addressing systematic inequalities in healthcare, with the aim of providing better COVID care to those who need it now, while creating a foundation for better healthcare in general in the future.¹⁴ This concerted effort resembles the efforts of past Christians but on a much larger scale, enabling the Church to have a larger and more unified impact than they could have had in previous centuries.

As the Church has provided their goals and framework, one can assess the international response by examining what has been done and comparing it to the goals laid out by the COVID commission. The first three of the stages determined by the commission were set to be accomplished in three-month quarters, and the final transformation stage was given six months. When evaluating the goals of the first quarter

¹³ COVID Vatican Commission, "2020 Year in Review."

¹⁴ COVID Vatican Commission, "2020 Year in Review."

(March – May 2020), it is clear that the Church succeeded in its start-up phase. The creation of the commission, the division into five working groups, and the identification of problems to be solved seem to satisfy the goal of creating a network with a clear strategy and desired impacts. The second phase appears to be a resounding success as well, with the details of each working group’s work and emphasis being published by the commission at the end of 2020.¹⁵

The real evaluation of the commission’s success and the best way to examine the full extent of the international response to the COVID pandemic comes from examining the last nine months of the commission’s plan, the action and transformation phases. If successful, the ability to implement such a large-scale and far-reaching response to a global pandemic would be a first for the Church and suggest hope for future disease outbreaks. The action phase, planned to take place from September to November of 2020, was the time in which the commission would cooperate with its collaborators to prepare to implement the impact proposals they spent the previous six months devising. The information presented by the commission at the end of 2020 suggests that this phase of their plan was successful overall but informed and potentially hampered by civil unrest in broader society.¹⁶ One influential example of this can be seen in the commentary of Sister Alessandra Smerilli, a renowned economist in the Holy See and a member of the COVID Commission's economy task force. Noticing the uptick in civil unrest towards the end of

¹⁵ COVID Vatican Commission, “2020 Year in Review.”

¹⁶ COVID Vatican Commission, “2020 Year in Review.”

2020, Smerilli observed that COVID had merely exacerbated previously present social ills, further highlighting the need to address inequality in the commission's work.¹⁷

However, despite some modifications due to unrest, the end of the commission's third phase set them up for success. By the end of 2020, the different working groups had raised millions of dollars, generated plentiful research examining the impacts of COVID globally, kept the laity involved with their progress, and utilized scientific knowledge to highlight the importance of vaccine development and distribution. The culmination of the effort was an emphasis on vaccine distribution, especially to vulnerable communities, and special care for migrant groups. The commission hoped that focusing on solving major COVID-related issues in the short term would allow them to clear the way for their long-term impact plans.¹⁸ These goals were expressed in a statement put out at the end of December 2020 where the commission details a Vaccine for all plan, giving 20 points for a fairer and healthier world. In this plan, the commission calls for immediate action to address the health and economic impacts of COVID; specifically calling for vaccines to be distributed fairly and encouraging the faithful to take the vaccines with a clear conscience. Finally, this plan emphasizes the importance of local leadership to best distribute the vaccine and highlights the need for the Church to be involved in vaccine distribution, using preexisting health networks and Bishops Conferences to boost distribution.¹⁹

¹⁷ Di Fausto Gasparroni, "Task-Force S. Sede, 'Proteste Piazza? Non Esacerbare Tensioni' - Oltretvere," *ANSA*, October 27, 2020. https://www.ansa.it/oltretevere/notizie/2020/10/27/task-force-s.sede-proteste-piazza-non-esacerbare-tensioni_72747b0f-d389-41f9-9c72-e7df8a77e10d.html.

¹⁸ COVID Vatican Commission, "2020 Year in Review."

¹⁹ Vatican COVID Commission, and Pontifical Academy for Life, "Vaccine for All. 20 Points for a Fairer and Healthier World," *Vatican*, December 29, 2020. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/12/29/201229c.html>.

While it is still not possible to evaluate if the commission's long-term goals will be reached, it is possible to evaluate if the commission has been able to support their vaccine distribution efforts and if they are taking steps towards their long-term goals. With this in mind it appears as though vaccine efforts have not been effectively implemented on a global scale the way the commission is calling for. Since releasing their vaccine plan, vaccination efforts have been hampered by supply issues and an initial hesitation among some wealthy countries like the United States to distribute their excess vaccines to those in need around the world.²⁰ However, despite these challenges, the COVID Commission and the Pope himself have remained vocal about the need for equitable vaccine distribution, with both urging local and global leaders to act charitably towards their fellow man and work to make vaccinations available to all. One notable address on the subject happened on Easter Sunday, 2021 when Francis called for a spirit of global responsibility, and chastised countries that were working to build up their armies instead of caring for the poor and vulnerable in the midst of the crisis.²¹

Despite the lack of participation in early 2021, in more recent days, world leaders have begun to respond to the calls for equitable vaccine distribution. Potentially spurred by Francis or activism led by several non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including

²⁰ Kevin Clarke, "If the Rich Hoard the Vaccine, the Pandemic Will Drag on': Catholic Health Advocates Urge the U.S. to Take the Lead on Global Distribution," *America Magazine*, April 19, 2021. <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2021/04/19/COVID-vaccine-distribution-pandemic-catholic-us-240470>.

²¹ Associated Press, "Pope Urges Global Vaccine Equity on Second Easter of the Pandemic," *MarketWatch*, April 4, 2021, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/pope-urges-global-vaccine-equity-on-second-easter-of-the-pandemic-01617567601>.

Catholic Relief Services, the United States has begun to engage in vaccine diplomacy.²² As part of this engagement, President Biden announced a plan to distribute 80 million vaccine doses to other countries by the end of June and has pledged \$4 billion in funding to global vaccine initiatives.²³ This initial plan was a success, with an additional 30 million doses being distributed by the end of July.²⁴ This enthusiasm has been echoed, albeit on a smaller scale, by other world leaders including those from France and China. While this is an encouraging start, the total number of pledged vaccines is nowhere near enough to vaccinate all the healthcare workers and at-risk populations in the low to middle-income countries that are receiving the vaccine donations.²⁵ Because of this, it is likely that the Pope and other Catholic leaders will continue to advocate for equitable vaccine distribution, as laid out in their *Vaccine for all* plan through the rest of 2021. This mixed success may not have been what the COVID Commission had hoped for, but it still demonstrates the Church's active engagement with the pandemic. As a body without any direct political power, the Vatican must rely on its influence to encourage world leaders to act in keeping with principles of social teaching, an effort that the clergy have valiantly pursued.

²² Zeke Miller, "Aid Groups Call on Biden to Develop Plans to Share Vaccines," *Associated Press*, March 26, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-us-news-coronavirus-pandemic-coronavirus-vaccine-19cd63a9f69ff5048f80228bebf75d79>.

²³ Kate Sullivan, "Biden Administration Announces Plan to Share First 25 million COVID Doses Abroad," *Cable News Network*, June 4, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/03/politics/biden-vaccine-sharing-plan/index.html>.

²⁴ Sabrina Siddiqui, "U.S. Has Shared 110 million Covid-19 Vaccine Doses Overseas," *The Wallstreet Journal*, August 3, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-says-it-has-shared-110-million-covid-19-vaccine-doses-overseas-11627981201>.

²⁵ Josh Michaud, Anna Rouw, and Jennifer Kates, "Putting U.S. Global COVID Vaccine Donations in Context," *KFF*, May 25, 2021. <https://www.kff.org/policy-watch/putting-u-s-global-COVID-vaccine-donations-in-context/>.

Additional success can be seen in other responses to the COVID pandemic that have been led by certain international Catholic organizations like the NGO, International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC). This NGO is of particular note because it works with refugees and migrants, normally transient groups that were seriously impacted by lockdowns and border closures during the height of the pandemic.²⁶ To best serve their target populations, ICMC coordinated an international response across multiple countries including Pakistan, Jordan, and Malaysia, trying to implement the necessary safety precautions while keeping their programs running. The volunteers at each location worked to keep people safe and at home whenever possible, operating free medical clinics, providing counseling and education services, and continuing to raise awareness in the virtual space.²⁷ The willingness of these volunteers to continue to serve their communities even at the risk of getting sick seems to appease the cause laid out by Francis in *Fratelli tutti* and appears in some ways to be a modern iteration of the same patterns seen in the early Church. Beyond this initial willingness to exemplify Christian values, NGOs like ICMC are poised to become a crucial part of vaccine distribution infrastructure, giving the COVID Commission yet another way to realize their goals.

Understanding the promise of international action now allows us to shift focus to the national level. The passionate rhetoric of Francis created the scenarios needed for the American Catholic social response to COVID, and it is from this starting point that the American Church and the USCCB responded. The American response to COVID has

²⁶ “What We Do,” The International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), October 29, 2020, https://www.icmc.net/what-we-do/?gclid=CjwKCAjwwqaGBhBKEiwAMk-FtP8bZCC8ZfOQyKpr2LkdsTjGqdzf7Q_p_blvrRbeyf_rWcx19S_LdRoC3nIQAvD_BwE.

²⁷ “The COVID Pandemic,” The International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), October 21, 2020, <https://www.icmc.net/covid19/>.

been even more locally focused and more in line with Vatican recommendations than its response to Influenza. This response, to be discussed at length in the remainder of this chapter and the next, like the response to Influenza, clearly models the ideal that Pope Leo set out in *Rerum Novarum*, as organizations of the Church work to help those impacted by COVID, especially the working [people] that Leo so passionately advocated for a century ago.²⁸

Regardless of small variations in belief or approach between Catholic organizations in the United States and global Church officials, the emphasis on community outreach and unity is universal. This dedication and solidarity is in keeping with the vision of what Francis and other leading clergy of the Church wish to see. Many members of the clergy do not want this solidarity to dissipate after the pandemic, and Francis has repeatedly emphasized the importance of building on the solidarity that the pandemic helped create, claiming it would be a great folly to have learned nothing from the pandemic and go back to long-standing patterns of consumption and disregard for humanity.²⁹ At the time of this writing, the delta variant has disrupted plans to return to normalcy, making it difficult to assess if pandemic solidarity will be maintained as life returns to normal. However, in order to best assess the effectiveness of the national Catholic response to COVID, the rest of this chapter will analyze the American Catholic response and compare the outcomes to the goals laid out by the COVID Commission in a similar manner to the international analysis discussed previously.

²⁸ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*.

²⁹ Francis, *Fratelli tutti*.

To understand the outcomes of the Church's response, it is important to understand how the USCCB responded to Vatican recommendations. Relying on the framework left to them by the Catholic Welfare Council, the bishops organized a response centered around the idea of being together in Christ, even if parishioners cannot be together in person.³⁰ Unlike the response to Influenza, facilitated in part by an existing network of Knights of Columbus stations because of World War I, the American response to COVID has been even more locally focused, with individual parishes reaching out to their parishioners and broader communities with the help of local and national organizations. This response, like the response to Influenza, clearly models the ideal that Leo set out in *Rerum Novarum*, as organizations of the Church work to help those impacted by COVID, especially the poor and underserved.³¹

Focusing first on the national response as laid out by the USCCB, the American Church has responded by emphasizing a message of community that focuses more on spiritual and mental togetherness and less on physical togetherness. The bishops encourage believers to pray for solidarity and provide clergy with tools and guides for how to conduct mass online and maintain contact with their parishioners. They also provide the laity with resources for expressing their faith online and developing a richer personal spiritual life. As the pandemic begins to abate, many hope that these new outlets of connectivity will create a stronger foundation for the Church in an ever-modernizing world.³²

³⁰ "COVID," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Accessed March 18, 2021, <https://www.usccb.org/committees/communications/COVID>.

³¹ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*.

³² "COVID," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Accessed March 18, 2021, <https://www.usccb.org/committees/communications/COVID>.

This crucial focus on community preservation and fostering a feeling of solidarity is occurring on a national level not only through the messaging of the bishops, but also through national Catholic organizations. Much like Francis did in the days of his youth, members of several national Catholic organizations are getting involved. These organizations work not just to provide aid on a community level, but also to advocate for Catholic interests and the interests of the poor on a national level, further embodying the principles of social teaching. Specifically, organizations like Catholic Charities USA (CCUSA) advocated for congress to pass bills that would provide COVID relief to the public. This advocacy increased when President Joseph Biden took office, as several Catholic organizations, including Catholic Charities, saw this as an opportunity for increased cooperation and progress in advancing social teaching.³³ This clear political involvement to achieve aims represents an evolved commitment to social teaching, one that has been influenced by the modern world and movements such as Liberation Theology to create the framework of today.

Looking first at how CCUSA responded to COVID, we can examine a coordinated, ongoing national response. From the beginning of mass lockdowns in March 2020, CCUSA began to coordinate responses on national and local levels to limit the impact of COVID. CCUSA's national-level advocacy began on March 11th when the charity petitioned congress to act to minimize the social impact of COVID. From that

³³ "Catholic Charities USA President and CEO Congratulates President Biden and Vice President Harris, Looks Forward to Collaborating with New Administration and Policymakers on Issues for the Common Good," *Catholic Charities USA*, March 20, 2021, https://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/press_release/catholic-charities-usa-president-and-ceo-congratulates-president-biden-and-vice-president-harris-looks-forward-to-collaborating-with-new-administration-and-policymakers-on-issues-for-the-common-good/.

point they began to respond to the pandemic in earnest. By late summer of 2020, CCUSA had already donated \$6.1 million to COVID relief efforts and distributed vast quantities of personal protective equipment (PPE) across the nation.³⁴ This advocacy continued, with the charity lobbying for the passage of nearly every proposed COVID relief bill in both 2020 and 2021, getting involved enough to critique then President Trump in October of 2020 when negotiations for a second COVID relief bill were briefly halted.³⁵ This advocacy did not stop at COVID relief spending either, as CCUSA was a part of the coalition that reached out to the Biden administration before the G7 summit to encourage him to pledge more vaccine doses to the international cause.³⁶

This successful political engagement was also coupled with social engagement, clearly demonstrating the impact of social teaching. While much of Catholic Charities' social outreach was coordinated at the local level, CCUSA still developed tools and recommendations for maintaining community during the pandemic, and distributed information about national resources. This response was in keeping with the recommendations of the USCCB and reflects an emphasis on fraternity much like what Francis calls for. Of the many resources they provided, some of the most notable include launching a telehealth network, focused on mental health counseling in underserved areas and publishing a series of information guides to combat misinformation. CCUSA also

³⁴ "Catholic Charities Responds to Pandemic," Catholic Charities USA, August 19, 2020, https://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/magazine_article/catholic-charities-responds-to-COVID/.

³⁵ "Catholic Charities USA Pledges to Seek Passage of New Pandemic Relief Bill," Catholic News Service, October 7, 2020, <https://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/story/catholic-charities-usa-pledges-to-seek-passage-of-new-pandemic-relief-bill/>.

³⁶ "Catholic Group Urges Biden to Address COVID Vaccine Access at G7 Summit," Catholic Charities USA, June 9, 2021, <https://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/story/catholic-group-urges-biden-to-address-COVID-vaccine-access-at-g7-summit/>.

partnered with several other Catholic groups to maximize their impact, such as their partnership with the Felician Sisters to mitigate the effects of eviction when all moratoriums are lifted.³⁷ This cooperation with the intent focus on community outreach and holistic care echoes the values of social responsibility to humanity as first laid out in *Rerum Novarum* and in keeping with Francis' values. By being both politically engaged and directly addressing community needs, CCUSA demonstrates the kind of willingness to embrace social teaching that Francis demonstrated during his time as archbishop of Buenos Aires.

This commitment to universal fraternity and a modern brand of social teaching is not unique to CCUSA. While they are and have been one of the most prolific American Catholic organizations, others including the Catholic Cares Coalition (CCC) have arisen as a direct result of the pandemic with the unified goals of spreading information, alleviating COVID related suffering, and distributing the vaccine. With this cohesive mission, the CCC describes itself as founded on Catholic social teaching, with a specific emphasis on vaccine equity in underserved areas. Because of this, the organization becomes the prime example of a unified COVID response in the United States that is founded on the principles Leo and Francis hold so dear. In fact, the CCC directly credits the teaching of Francis and the recommendations of the USCCB for informing their understanding of and action on social teaching. Unlike the independent CCUSA, the CCC exists as a conglomeration of different Catholic organizations allowing them to focus the efforts and resources of many organizations into solving one problem more effectively.

³⁷ "COVID Response Year in Review-2021," Catholic Charities USA, March 31, 2021, https://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/COVID-Response-Year-in-Review_2021.pdf.

This type of cooperation grants national resources to local causes and enables even small Catholic communities to be of service to their fellow parishioners, as well as their broader communities.³⁸

The effective mobilization of resources by national organizations under the direction of the USCCB resembles, at least in some ways, the mobilization of the KOC and individual orders during Influenza a century ago. However, the Church has been able to affect more change than they were in that previous pandemic. A stronger motivation to preserve solidarity than before, combined with the technology necessary to achieve goals more efficiently has allowed the Church to mobilize like never before. The drive to preserve a fresh wave of universal fraternity and community solidarity on all levels is in part what makes the considerations for implementing social teaching (and therefore the response at large) different for Influenza and COVID. When Influenza struck, the world was in the midst of World War I, and there was already a common cause for many nations, but there was little sense of universal fraternity as the world was divided. Because of this, Influenza did not unite people globally through common suffering the way COVID appears to have done. However, it is important to note that in the 1900s there was not the same need, at least on the community level, to capitalize on a temporary sense of solidarity created by the illness. World War I had provided compelling enough reasons to create such sentiments. This meant that the focus of clergy and laity alike was different, generating a response less rooted in establishing long-term change, and more focused on alleviating temporary suffering. Additionally, even if some did see Influenza as an opportunity to foster local and global solidarity, in the midst of a world war,

³⁸ “About Us,” CatholicCares.org, Accessed June 29, 2021, <https://catholiccares.org/about-us>.

multiple humanitarian crises, and general political instability, the Pope was not able to focus his efforts in the way Francis has been able to do with COVID.³⁹

The impact of this new response to disease at a local level will be explored more fully in the next chapter. This is a significant level to consider because many local Catholic organizations and parishes also took it upon themselves to care and advocate for their communities during the pandemic, clearly demonstrating a continuation of the Christian tradition established in Chapter 2. It is at this community level that lasting solidarity and social impact can be the most readily seen and easily examined, making the community level the final place to analyze the Catholic pandemic response through the lens of social teaching.

³⁹ See Chapter 3 for further discussion.

CHAPTER FIVE

Local Responses to COVID

In a nation as large as the United States local level coordination and participation has been critical for implementing national COVID strategies effectively, but local Catholic responses are significant beyond merely distributing national resources. Each diocese responded to the pandemic differently, many with social teaching in mind as they acted to meet the needs of their parishioners based on their unique insight.¹ It is here, in these tailored responses that solidarity can be best examined, not merely as a dollar amount raised and distributed, but by assessing the actual human impact of Catholic relief efforts during COVID's first peak and now as communities begin to reform and address the delta variant.²

A prime example of the influence of social teaching on the American response to COVID can be seen in the actions of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston. When COVID lockdowns left parishioners and the wider community in need, the Archdiocese utilized existing community outreach programs to provide an even greater amount of support to their community. Reflecting on the work done in 2020, the Archbishop, Daniel Cardinal DiNardo, talked about how the Archdiocese's partner charity, Catholic Charities

¹ It is important to note that the COVID response in the United States has varied widely across locales, with some Dioceses acting in ways that are inconsistent with Vatican or USCCB recommendations. However, this thesis will not focus on those examples as it appears much of the national and international leadership supports the approach so far discussed, and there are an ample number of locales following USCCB or Vatican recommendations.

² As the situation with the Delta variant continues to evolve, all information in this chapter is as of September 2, 2021, unless otherwise noted.

Houston, had distributed thousands of tons of food to people experiencing food insecurity. He also mentioned that an affiliated community clinic had begun to offer curbside prescription pick-up, and that the Chaplain Corps was working in hospitals to provide pastoral care even with the restrictions.¹ However, even as vaccines have become widely available, the Archdiocese has not stopped their relief efforts and social activism. In the same letter that reflected on what had been accomplished in 2020, DiNardo calls for those who are able to continue to support community initiatives. In addition to this call for maintaining social outreach to those who need it most, the cardinal has also become involved in encouraging vaccine distribution, releasing two different statements reassuring believers that the vaccine is ethical to take, and the Archdiocese has posted links to vaccine signups on their website.²

As the delta variant has spread and given rise to new concerns, the Archdiocese has continued to monitor the situation and encourage vaccination. As of yet, they have stood by the statements they released in May of 2021, allowing parishioners to attend mass in person, with optional masks at full capacity. However, they are still maintaining some limits on communion allowing communion to be given on the tongue or in the hand at parishioner's discretion, but still suspending wine from the universal chalice. Finally, the obligation to attend mass is still waived for members of the Archdiocese.³ This

¹ Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, *An Invitation from Daniel Cardinal DiNardo*, Letter to Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, Houston, Texas: Office of the Cardinal, 2021.

² "Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston Health Updates," Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://www.archgh.org/healthupdates/>.

³ Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, *A letter to the faithful regarding updated pandemic protocols*, May 19, 2021, Letter, From Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, <https://www.archgh.org/news-events/news/cardinals-corner/cardinals-corner/a-letter-to-the-faithful-regarding-updated-pandemic-protocols/>.

response to the ever-changing situation illustrates not only the Church's regard for the community but also their ability to meet the needs of the faithful at the local level. By examining their community and case numbers, the Archdiocese is able to make much more refined decisions than any national or international organization could, reinforcing community in a way similar to the patterns discussed in Chapter 2.

In addition to the robust response on the part of the Archdiocese, the Houston community is also supported by local-level organizations such as the Houston chapter of the Catholic worker. The Houston chapter is organized around Casa Juan, founded by Mark and Louise Zwick in 1980, and since its inception, the chapter has been dedicated to living out Catholic social teaching as a tireless voice for the working class, especially migrants. In the 41 years since its founding, Casa Juan has evolved into a resource center for immigrants, providing housing, food, and medical care.⁴ This care is informed by the message of the Catholic Worker movement, best summarized by Dorothy Day when she explains that the movement exists because they “believe that all people are brothers and sisters in the Fatherhood of God.”⁵ This clearly demonstrates the influence of social teaching and is directly in line with *Fratelli Tutti*. As COVID spread, Casa Juan used their resources to offer the immigrant community whatever support they could during the pandemic, including distributing COVID vaccines and keeping their doors open to receive new migrants even at the height of lockdowns. While the pandemic did mean

⁴ Joachim Zwick, “Mark Zwick, Founder of Casa Juan Diego Dies at 88,” *The Houston Catholic Worker*, November 18, 2016, <https://cjd.org/2016/11/18/mark-zwick-founder-of-casa-juan-diego-advocate-for-undocumented-and-the-poor-dies-at-88/>.

⁵ Catholic Worker Movement and Dorothy Day, “Aims and Purposes of the Catholic Worker Movement,” *The Houston Catholic Worker*, Accessed July 14, 2021, <https://cjd.org/about/what-is-the-catholic-worker-movement/>.

they were not able to provide all of their traditional ancillary services, Casa Juan has recently been able to start the process of resuming full operation and calls for the community to look to the future of a post-COVID world.⁶

This consistent ethic for life and intentional approach to communal care clearly illustrates the Church's high regard for human life and dignity and demonstrates an evolution beyond the pattern of care discussed in Chapter 2. Due to the advances in medical infrastructure, there has not been a dire need for volunteer nurses across the country the way there was during Influenza, and yet, there are still many unmet needs in the community as a result of COVID and the ensuing quarantines. By stepping up to care for the community and moving their focus beyond just people who contracted COVID, the Archdiocese took care of their community in the form of food, pastoral care, etc. - especially those whose livelihoods may have been affected through no fault of their own. This outreach, while different from the outreach of early Christians in the first few centuries, appears to be having similar effects, preserving the community through the pandemic and potentially leading to communal growth going forward under the careful supervision of local leaders.

This holistic approach to outreach is not unique to that particular Archdiocese; the Archdiocese of Philadelphia followed a similar approach and took it a step further, structuring their response to meet the needs of the moment, and prepare for the future. In order to coordinate holistic community care, the Archdiocese partnered with Catholic

⁶ Dawn McCarty, "Love in Action at Casa Juan Diego During COVID-19," *The Houston Catholic Worker*, Accessed July 14, 202, <https://cjd.org/2020/06/10/love-in-action-at-casa-juan-diego-during-covid-19/>.

Louise Zwick, "Moderna Vaccines at Casa Juan Diego," *The Houston Catholic Worker*, June 18, 2021, <https://cjd.org/2021/06/18/moderna-vaccines-at-casa-juan-diego/>.

Human Services and Nutritional Development Services to maintain existing outreach efforts and increase them. Through these partnerships, Philadelphia Catholics were able to provide over a million meals to people in need, in addition to providing emergency supplies, parenting classes, free bathing and laundry facilities, help with online school, and legal assistance to immigrants.⁷ By maintaining this support network throughout the pandemic, the Archdiocese was able to care for the temporal needs of the community in the middle of an unprecedented emergency. During this time the Archdiocese also created plans for their parish after the pandemic. In a strategy called “Arise: Restoring Catholic Life after the Pandemic,” the Archdiocese lays out their multifold approach to restoring a strong faith community once the hardship of disease and quarantine have passed. This approach includes guidelines and suggestions for how to conduct online mass, how to fundraise, and how to transition back to in-person mass when appropriate. By creating a response to the pandemic and a plan for after the pandemic the Archdiocese exemplifies the ideas of social teaching and will likely maintain or even grow their parish as life returns to normal.⁸

While the far-reaching impacts of this plan are yet to be seen, we can evaluate what is occurring in the present as an indication of success. As the pandemic began to subside, the Archdiocese was able to implement its plan for returning to in-person mass. In a campaign called “Nothing Compares to Being There,” the Archdiocese laid out guidelines for how individual priests and parishes can plan for and invite their members

⁷ “Catholic Human Services Archdiocese of Philadelphia COVID Response Impact Numbers,” Archdiocese of Philadelphia, Accessed July 14, 2021, <http://archphila.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Secretariat-for-Catholic-Human-Services-Coronavirus-Response-Efforts-and-Community-Impact-March-16-June-19.pdf>.

⁸ “Archdiocese of Philadelphia,” Archdiocese of Philadelphia, accessed July 14, 2021, <http://archphila.org/arise/>.

back to in-person mass and fellowship. In a letter to his congregation, Archbishop Nelson J. Perez explains that even though live stream mass and virtual connectivity have been essential tools during the pandemic, now is the time for the faithful to begin to return to mass and regular community functions like receiving the Eucharist and Holy Communion. In this letter, Perez explains that the clergy will be using the summer to prepare to invite everyone back to normal mass in September, but encourages those who can to return before then.⁹ This letter was released in conjunction with updated health and safety guidelines from the Archdiocese that lifted many, though not all, restrictions on summer mass. The most important of these updated guidelines include parishioners now being allowed back to in-person mass without masks and allowing for communion to be distributed as normal. However, the obligation of mass for the faithful would not be reinstated until August in preparation for the September phase of their reopening plan.¹⁰

Despite growing concerns over the delta variant and increasing COVID cases in the area, the Archdiocese has stayed true to this declaration in most meaningful ways, opening mass and reinstating the mass obligation. In addition, despite Philadelphia reinstating its indoor mask mandate, some churches are allowing the laity to make their own health decisions and not requiring masks, while simultaneously providing the opportunity to socially distance or sit only with those wearing masks, as well as giving

⁹ Archbishop Nelson J. Pérez, *Pentecost Letter*, Letter to Archdiocese of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, May 23, 2021.

¹⁰ Father Dennis Gill, “Update on the Celebration of the Sacred Liturgy with the Lifting of COVID-19 Restrictions in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the City of Philadelphia,” Letter to Archdiocese of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, June 28, 2021.

Archbishop Nelson J. Pérez, “Statement of Archbishop Nelson J. Pérez Regarding Reinstating the Obligation to Attend Sunday Mass.” *Archdiocese of Philadelphia*, July 15, 2021. <http://archphila.org/statement-of-archbishop-nelson-j-perez-regarding-reinstating-the-obligation-to-attend-sunday-mass/>.

unmasked members of the parish the option to participate in mass outside of the building. According to one priest in the Archdiocese, there is a “tension between trying to be understanding that everyone [is] experiencing [the] pandemic differently, and wanting people to be able to practice the faith and not be crippled by fear.” It is this tension that is driving the Archdiocese’s accommodating approach as they try to create a community that feels safe and welcoming to all of the faithful in the area.¹¹

Despite some inherent juxtaposition, this approach seems to be well-reasoned and poised for success. Among the many recommendations and guidelines, the Archdiocese offered local priests classes on how to revive their parishes if the faithful do not come back to mass and suggests that one of the best ways to bring people back is to emphasize community care with personalized invitations and reminders of how much people are loved.¹² This focus on community care after a pandemic resembles what early Christians were doing and seems in line with the message of *Fratelli Tutti* and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. This intentional welcoming back combined with the ceaseless efforts of the Archdiocese and their local branch of Catholic Charities during the pandemic seems to have set the church up for a robust return this fall.

Similar to the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, the Diocese of Austin has also implemented their own welcoming back plan to encourage a return to in-person mass. Like the Archdiocese, the Diocese provided social support to their community during the height of lockdown, and they are now working to transition the momentum generated by

¹¹ Kristen A. Graham, “Amid rising COVID-19 cases and delta concerns, Philly-area Catholics return to weekly, in-person Mass obligation,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Aug 15, 2021, <https://www.inquirer.com/news/catholic-church-masks-mass-obligation-philadelphia-20210815.html>.

¹² “Nothing Compares to Being There,” Archdiocese of Philadelphia, accessed July 14, 2021, <http://archphila.org/nothingcompares/>.

those actions into a better version of in-person community. The diocese initially responded to the pandemic by channeling their efforts into community support avenues maintaining their existing counseling, food security, and disaster relief efforts, while adding additional free crisis counseling and distributing funds to individuals in need.¹³ This helped the Diocese make it through the material difficulties of the pandemic, but mass had to be given virtually and, like faithful around the world, the laity had to learn how to build community online or in very limited in-person settings. In an effort to support parishioners through this challenging time, Bishop Joe S. Vasquez released a letter ordaining 2021 as the "year of the domestic Church," laying out a plan to provide the laity with themed recourses for building faith and community at home every month, effectively turning the home into the center of spiritual life until parishes could meet together again.¹⁴ As vaccine availability progressed and reopening became a possibility, Vasquez added additional community reinforcing guidelines, creating a plan to invite parishioners back to mass called "Gathered Together."

This initiative bears many similarities to the "Nothing Compares to Being There" campaign implemented in Philadelphia but operates on a slightly different timeline and gives individual parishes more flexibility. In an act of deference to the unique understanding of individual priests, the Diocese of Austin created "Gathered Together" and related resources so that individual priests had the opportunity to implement it

¹³ "COVID-19 Services; Operations," Catholic Charities of Central Texas, June 22, 2020, <https://www.ccctx.org/news-and-features/covid-response/covid-operations/>.

¹⁴ "Year of the Domestic Church," Diocese of Austin, December 2020. <https://austindiocese.org/domestic-church>.

anytime between the end of May through the end of August.¹⁵ This window of implementation has allowed churches in the diocese to reopen at their own pace and continue mass despite the rising number of cases associated with the Delta variant. In a message released in August, Bishop Joe S. Vasquez emphasized the importance of getting vaccinated and encouraged parish leaders "to implement safeguards that best fit the particular reality in their parish and school."¹⁶ This combined with the monthly resources available to the laity has helped the clergy remain in contact with their parishioners and keep Catholic faith strong. This continual reinforcement appears to have been well received thus far, and it seems as though the Diocese is poised to return to a robust spiritual life that has been reinforced at home. The hope is that those reintroduced to mass will have a greater understanding of the privilege of in-person meetings and seek to be more involved with their community now that they are able. By giving individual parishes the ability to exercise discernment, the Diocese of Austin has been able to be much more targeted in their efforts to rebuild than any national or even Archdiocese level response, with potentially substantial rewards.

As a final consideration, combining care during and after the pandemic has been a key aspect of multiple successful pandemic responses including the response of the Archdiocese of Washington. Like many other dioceses around the nation, the Archdiocese of Washington responded to the COVID pandemic with an eye for caring for their parishioners temporally and spiritually. Specific to this Archdiocese though, was

¹⁵ James A. Misko, *Gathered Together – Reunidos Juntos*, Letter to Priests, Deacons and Lay Ministers serving in the Diocese of Austin, Austin, Texas: Diocese of Austin, May 24, 2021.

¹⁶ "Pastoral Message from the Diocese on COVID-19," Diocese of Austin, August 9, 2021, <https://austindiocese.org/covid19>.

a continued focus on their mission of evangelization and support for their network of schools. In conjunction with their partner chapter of Catholic Charities, the Archdiocese provided food, medical care, financial aid, and employment services to parishioners and the broader community throughout the pandemic. Even though many of these services had to be moved into virtual space, they were still able to provide key community support.¹⁷ However, beyond local support, this Archdiocese offers a unique look into regional coordination, as the Archdiocese is part of the larger Baltimore province group of dioceses and archdioceses that often act in conjunction with each other on large or impactful decisions. The results of the Archdiocese unique focus coupled with region coordination is a nuanced and multi-level response to COVID.

During the pandemic, in addition to providing key support in the form of food, finance, and medical care, the Archdiocese also had to support a network of Catholic schools. The efforts made by the Archdiocese to ensure that their students still had access to quality education in a safe way mirror what happened around the country. Catholic schools in the Archdiocese's jurisdiction went virtual, and students and teachers had to learn how to connect via internet platforms instead of in-person. Most schools in the Archdiocese went virtual in March 2020 and the vast majority had not returned to normal in-person learning as of May 2021. However, as vaccines became more readily available, the Archdiocese released detailed health and safety plans following local ordinances that allowed for all schools to return to in-person learning as safely and normally as possible. This plan, called "Onward Together in Faith," was specifically designed to support

¹⁷ "Covid-19 Resource Guide," Catholic Charities DC, June 30, 2021, <https://www.catholiccharitiesdc.org/covid19-resource-guide/>.

learning communities in Catholic schools throughout the Archdiocese as well as lifting restrictions on many of the young adult community-building trips and gatherings that have been on hiatus since March 2020. The goal of this plan is to keep the youth engaged with the church and bring them back to their faith and routine as seamlessly as possible.¹⁸ This keen attention to bringing young people back reflects the needs and focus of this specific Archdiocese as they see their youth as the next generation of evangelists and faithful churchgoers, people who will ensure the Archdiocese remains strong when existing leadership steps down.

This future conscious focus was also reflected in the way the Archdiocese maintained their evangelization efforts. Since 2010, the Archdiocese has been focused on a unique mission of evangelizing locally and abroad. In the pastoral letter that began this focus Archbishop Donald W. Wuerl encourages people to participate in what he calls new or re-evangelization, calling on the faithful under his care to initiate conversations with friends and family, Catholics or non-Catholics, to try to explain the truths of the Catholic faith and make people excited to participate. Wuerl emphasized the importance of a faith community with campaigns such as “The Light is ON for You,” that exist to this day and shape the mission of parishioners in the D.C. - Maryland area. This focus on outreach and bringing others into the fold could put the Archdiocese ahead of many others in their efforts to bring people back to church after lockdown because they already have a preexisting network of small groups, involved clergy, and passionate laity devoted

¹⁸ “Archdiocese of Washington Returning to Ministry and School Guidelines,” Archdiocese of Washington Catholic Schools, June 18, 2021, <https://adwcatholicschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ADW-Returning-to-Ministry-and-School-Guidelines-Overview-FINAL-061821.pdf>.

to maintaining the “legacy of the local church.”¹⁹ The Archdiocese also took special care to maintain this mission during the pandemic, providing grant applications, training on how to lead small group meetings virtually, and trying to maintain as much communication as possible.²⁰ By supporting this network, they paved the way for reopening.

The current Archbishop of Washington, Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory, released his official decree reinstating the mass obligation for parishioners in a joint statement with other leading Bishops from diocese in the province of Baltimore. This statement announced that the mass obligation would be reinstated starting June 27, 2021 and it encouraged the faithful to look forward to a return to normalcy.²¹ In further statements directed just to Washington, Gregory expressed his gratitude to his parishioners for being so willing to maintain the “mission of evangelization” by learning how to use new digital platforms and implementing new safety and cleaning protocols when in-person services were absolutely necessary. He highlighted that these efforts have allowed them to “welcom[e] back members of the community in thoughtful, smaller and safer ways” during the pandemic, and will allow them to return to fully in-person worship.²² This

¹⁹ Donald W. Wuerl, “Disciples of the Lord: Sharing the Vision a Pastoral Letter on The New Evangelization,” Letter to The Clergy, Religious and Laity of the Archdiocese of Washington, Washington D.C., D.C.: Archdiocese of Washington, 2010.

²⁰ “Evangelization Resources,” Archdiocese of Washington, March 30, 2021, <https://adw.org/living-the-faith/evangelization/resources/>.

²¹ Cardinal Wilton D Gregory, William E. Lori, Michael F. Burbidge, Barry C. Knestout, Mark E. Brennan, and William F. Malooly, *Lifting the General Dispensation from the Obligation to Attend Mass*, Letter to the Province of Baltimore and the Archdiocese of Washington, Bishops of the Province of Baltimore, June 2, 2021. <https://adw.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/06/Joint-Statement-Dispensation-060221.pdf>.

²² Archdiocese of Washington, “Archdiocese of Washington Returning to Ministry and School Guidelines.”

return has been much anticipated and appears to have been implemented well so far despite having to make moderate adjustments for COVID cases related to the delta variant. Here it is important to note that unlike the Diocese of Austin for example, the in-person masses in Washington will still require masks and a degree of social distancing, a requirement that was in effect even before the spike in delta cases.²³ This is important because it highlights the ability of the clergy to respond to concerns and needs at the local level. In Austin, where the public is less concerned, clergy are able to attract believers back to unrestricted mass, while the clergy in Washington are able to address the fears of some parishioners and maintain COVID safety precautions to achieve the same result. This specific understanding has allowed each of the locales thus far examined to respond in a way that is in keeping with recommendations of the USCCB as well *Fratelli Tutti*, while also meeting the needs of their local communities.

One of the most significant of these needs is the obligation of the faithful to attend mass and receive communion. In each of the dioceses examined, the local clergy have addressed these needs differently allowing in-person mass at different times, implementing varying mask and social distancing policies, and changing how communion is administered in each locale. While each of the dioceses relied on the historical precedent of Influenza and utilized Canon law to temporarily move religious services and community into the virtual space, each chose a different method for reopening and administering Holy Communion.²⁴ For example, while the Archdiocese of

²³ "Guidelines for Celebration of Mass and Holy Communion," Archdiocese of Washington, accessed September 2, 2021, <https://adw.org/coronavirus/>.

²⁴ For in-depth discussion on the precedent of Influenza and Canon Law, see Chapters 3 & 4.

Galveston-Houston allows a mask-less communion with only restrictions on the universal chalice, the Archdiocese of Washington chooses to require masks for all participants, even those distributing communion.²⁵ These varying policies reflect the needs of the faithful in each community and demonstrate the commitment to fraternity in each locale, allowing parishioners to embrace social teaching and act charitably towards themselves and each other.

Examining local responses to COVID demonstrates a further commitment to social teaching and a consistent ethic for life and human dignity, while also taking into account regional differences in the Church. COVID impacted different areas in unique ways, requiring a response tailored to the needs of each locale. Local dioceses were able to do what larger coordination efforts could not, they were able to reinforce community by being in the community. It was on the local level that the impacts of COVID relief were most apparent, the faithful were not volunteering for a faraway cause, instead many people stepped up to help friends and neighbors, strengthening preexisting relationships. It is this aspect of the Catholic COVID response that will likely create results similar to what was seen in early Christian responses to pandemics, which were typically coordinated locally as well.²⁶ This approach allowed early Christians to see gains in membership and stronger community bonds after pandemics, and it appears that local COVID responses will lead to similar outcomes.

From the multi-level examination thus far discussed, it becomes clear then that the Catholic response to COVID is characterized by these ideas on every level. From the

²⁵ See discussion in above paragraphs.

²⁶ See the example of local coordination during the plague of Cyprian in Chapter 2.

Vatican to individual parishes, the Catholic community has responded to the pandemic by reaching out. The Church has utilized preexisting social support and distribution structures as their foundation and they have built upon this to see their followers through the worst of lockdown and into a new normal, one that many hope is characterized by an increased recognition of the universality of humanity and regard for fellow human beings. This response far outshines any previous we have discussed. With modern technology, and leadership under Francis focused on community building and universal fraternity, the response to COVID was necessarily designed to strengthen communities in ways that went beyond merely caring for the sick. More so than its 20th century comparison point, Influenza, COVID has highlighted social inequalities that have existed for generations and has in many ways forced people to act much swifter to address these issues, often primarily on the local level. This local coordination in cooperation with national and international recommendations has been a defining characteristic of the Catholic response to COVID and will likely pave the way for even more integrated approaches to problem-solving just as Influenza did a century ago.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

As 2021 wanes and yet another COVID variant is sweeping the globe, it can be difficult to assess what the full impact of COVID will eventually be.¹ However, it is possible to examine COVID within the context of what has already occurred and look to past pandemics to consider what may occur in the future. As it stands, COVID represents the first global pandemic in a truly modern era. Information that used to take hours or even days to be transmitted is now accessible to anyone in seconds. In a similar manner, our understanding of science and public health measures is the best it has ever been, taking out much of the guesswork that was present in the pandemics of antiquity. However, just as it was for COVID's most recent comparison point, Influenza, compliance with public health measures is a challenge and there is still much to be learned about the ever-changing virus.² The uncertain times of the present do not lend themselves to a complete analysis of COVID's impacts, but it is still possible to examine the new paradigm COVID relief efforts appear to be establishing, one that is more rooted

¹ As of August 2021, the Delta variant is causing a second wave and new lockdowns in certain areas of the country. The expected peak is projected to occur in mid-October.

Stein, Rob, and Selena Simmons-Duffin, "The Delta Variant Will Drive a Steep Rise in U.S. COVID Deaths, a New Model Shows," *NPR*, July 22, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/07/22/1019475669/delta-variant-will-drive-a-steep-rise-in-covid-deaths-model-shows>.

² Berkeley Lovelace, "Medical Historian Compares the Coronavirus to the 1918 Flu PANDEMIC: Both Were Highly Political," *CNBC*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/28/comparing-1918-flu-vs-coronavirus.html>.

in Catholic social teaching than previous pandemic responses and focused on building a better future.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, examining the Catholic response to the disease has demonstrated continuity with the pattern of Christian responses established in Chapter 2. Much like their predecessors, Catholic communities responded to COVID by reaching out to the sick, providing the care and social support needed to maintain their communities. However, unlike the disease responses coordinated by Christians in previous centuries, Catholics today are able to utilize technology and preexisting infrastructure to aid them in their outreach, allowing them to move beyond merely caring for the sick to addressing the temporal needs of the community as a whole.¹ This evolution of care seems to represent a modern iteration of a long-observed practice, one that has produced similar effects. Like many of the communities discussed in Chapter 2, communities with a large Catholic presence had more social support and aid available during the worst of lockdowns. The actions of the faithful in these areas mimic the first two parts of the pattern of response discussed in Chapter 2. During the COVID pandemic, Catholics became actively involved in caring for those impacted by the illness or lockdowns and have taken steps to reinforce existing community bonds.² While it is difficult to predict if this will lead to a growth of community or membership in the midst of another wave of COVID, it seems a likely possibility.³

¹ While COVID responses were significantly aided by modern technology, caring for broader society is not unprecedented. An early example of this can be seen in Philadelphia after Yellow Fever, see Chapter 2.

² For detailed descriptions of these responses see chapter 4 for international/national responses, and chapter 5 for local-level action.

³ See chapter 5 for details, specifically the Archbishop of Washington.

Moving beyond the established continuity of care, it is important to consider the underlying principles that informed such behavior then and now. As is discussed in Chapter 3, Catholic social teaching has had a significant influence on Catholic practice, including disease response, since the late 1800s. However, it seems that Catholic social teaching may simply be the most modern presentation of a long-established set of beliefs. When Pope Leo XIII released *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, he drew heavily on the theology of people like Saint Aquinas.⁴ Indeed, many of the ideas he espoused, such as the duty of Christian charity to care for the poor were not new but were presented as part of a tailored message to address the needs of his time. From this perspective, an examination of the notions of early church leaders such as Saint Cyprian reveals that their beliefs surrounding community care and the sick are fairly compatible with modern iterations of social teaching. This compatibility seems to be partially responsible for the continuity of Christian care that can be seen throughout the history of pandemics and illustrates a central theme of Christian belief.

Considering the reaction to this current pandemic, the Catholic Church has placed social teaching at the forefront of their response. From the Vatican down to the local level, the Church has emphasized meeting the social needs of the community. In his encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis spoke to the inequities that COVID highlighted, encouraging everyone to reexamine themselves and embrace a spirit of universal fraternity.⁵ Francis further demonstrated his commitment to social teaching when he asked the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development to create a commission

⁴ Bradley & Brugger. *Catholic Social Teaching*.

⁵ Francis, *Fratelli tutti*.

on COVID. This commission focused not only on the issues COVID was posing in the present, but also looked to how they could address inequality in line with the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.⁶ This future conscious approach marks an evolution in caring for the sick, one that will allow a continued focus on those in need even when the world is not in crisis. This clear commitment to social teaching has characterized the rule of Francis even before the pandemic, but the vigor with which social principles have been applied to the pandemic response can offer believers hope in a post-COVID future.

In order to ensure that membership will be strong in a post-COVID world, the church is not only reaching out to those who need help, but at almost every level of leadership there is a focus on maintaining community. This idea is in keeping with social teaching, as well as the beliefs of early theologians, and suggests that communal growth after COVID is possible, as it was during previous pandemics. The forward-thinking leadership of the Vatican has been reinforced at both the national and local levels in the United States, with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops adopting their *Together in Christ* campaign.⁷ This campaign encourages online engagement where in-person engagement is not possible and outlines strategies for the faithful to use to maintain a connection with others in their parishes. This notion of digital community has been embraced at the diocesan level, often with local officials creating tailored plans for

⁶ COVID-19 Vatican Commission, “2020 Year in Review.”
For more information, see chapter 4.

⁷ USCCB, “COVID-19.”

both during and after the pandemic.⁸ This local-level coordination is of particular interest to this discussion.

While there was a national response to COVID on the part of the USCCB and several national Catholic organizations, much of the most impactful community maintenance and COVID relief efforts took place at the local level. It was on an individual diocesan or parish level where faith leaders have been able to apply their expertise to best meet the specific needs of their immediate community. So far, this made the impact of their actions more keenly felt than that of national organizations. This impact is possible in part because local leaders responding to COVID have been able to take advantage of resources their predecessors did not have. Looking to Influenza as an example, leaders can model what worked then and try to avoid what did not. Local churches have also been able to utilize preexisting charitable infrastructure that many have been developing for decades. Some such social infrastructure, like Catholic Social Services in Philadelphia, arose in the midst of Influenza and had the ability to scale their services when COVID created the need.⁹ This combined with technological and scientific advancements has changed the scale at which local communities can respond. Instead of relying on KOC outposts or local orders to provide supplies and nursing staff, today's Catholic communities can rely on a robust Catholic network of social services, as well as better support from the local and national government. While this is of course limited in

⁸ See Chapter 5.

⁹ "About Catholic Social Services," Catholic social services, accessed August 11, 2021, <https://cssphiladelphia.org/about/#:~:text=First%20incorporated%20in%201919%20as,the%20diversity%20of%20services%20offered.>

areas without a strong faith presence, areas like those discussed in Chapter 5 model how effective local COVID responses can be when reinforced with modern tools.

Examining how Catholics have been able to utilize resources better in this current pandemic suggests an evolution in social care that ought to be further explored. As one considers the possible long-term impacts of the COVID pandemic on Catholic communities and their faith, it seems prudent to consider that these impacts may be intrinsically linked with other community initiatives, such as the “Light is ON for you” campaign in the Archdiocese of Washington, potentially making them more far reaching.¹⁰ This has already been demonstrated by the Vatican’s COVID commission and their intentional alignment with UN goals. However, ties to broader community initiatives can even be seen in some of the return to mass plans discussed in Chapter 5, specifically those outlined by the Archdioceses of Philadelphia and Washington. In both cases, the Archdiocese made use of preexisting programs and tied their COVID response into their long-term plans. In some ways, this seems like a departure from the pattern of Christian response established in Chapter 2. While it is unlikely that none of the clergy of the past two millennia have attempted to rally a disease response to align with long-term goals, there is very little documented evidence of clergy doing so at scale. Even the Council of Trent, which was in some ways a reaction to the failings of the Church exposed by the Black Death, was more reactionary than anticipatory and did not seem to consider the lessons of the previous pandemic as central to the discussion.¹¹ Because of this, the Catholic COVID response appears to represent something new.

¹⁰ See Chapter 5.

¹¹ Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague*.

While it is impossible to determine all the impacts of this evolution in response, it appears that the Catholic response, especially under Francis, has been more deeply rooted in social teaching than responses to previous pandemics. Even the response to Influenza, so recently after *Rerum Novarum* was published, seemed to lack the same commitment. Unlike his predecessor, Pope Benedict XV, Francis has made social teaching central to his papal rule from the beginning, intentionally emphasizing solidarity as a key part of social teaching.¹² Francis has also had the benefit of being able to address COVID without dealing with other world-shaping events.¹³ It appears as though a renewed emphasis on social teaching under Francis combined with the Vatican's ability to focus on the pandemic has created a situation with the potential to change how disease response or even social outreach are handled. If the Catholic church continues to follow a model based on Francis' theological ethic, the distinction between caring for those in crisis during a pandemic, and merely attending to the needs of others as an act of solidarity will become increasingly blurred. This could shift the idea of moral duty that was demonstrated in previous pandemics away from a duty to care for the sick, and towards a duty to care for all as a recognition of shared humanity. While it is too early to tell whether this trend will continue, the foundation for it appears to have been established.

In addition to the potentially far-reaching impacts of integrating social teaching with disease response, it is also important to consider the interplay between adherence to public health measures consistent with social teaching. This aspect of the COVID

¹² Meghan J. Clark, "Pope Francis and the Christological Dimensions of Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching," *Theological Studies* 80, no. 1 (March 2019): 102–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563918819818>.

¹³ Benedict spent much of his time attempting to mediate conflict during world war I, making him less able to address the Influenza pandemic.

response is one that very clearly builds on a foundation established during the Influenza pandemic and illustrates another aspect of the Church's ethic for life. During Influenza, some bishops relied on Canons 223 and 920 from Benedict's revised Code of Canon law to justify halting mass or complying with other public safety recommendations.¹⁴ This reaction is very similar to what has occurred during this pandemic, with many bishops highlighting the Influenza precedent and the law as justification for complying with public health orders. Then and now, taking action to social distance, halt mass, or even wear a face-covering was justified in terms of the greater good preventing the spread of disease to protect the community. This logic demonstrates some of the key components of social teaching, namely high regard for preserving human life and dignity. Unlike some of the more general, future-centric responses to COVID seen at the Vatican level, compliance with public health recommendations is directly related to disease management and typically occurs at the local parish or diocesan level. This continuity of communal good being placed above individual good is in keeping with the values that informed previous pandemic responses, but this new response demonstrates a better integration of science and faith when addressing disease management.

However, unlike the Influenza pandemic, clergy today face a more complicated issue when considering whether or not to advocate that the faithful get vaccinated for COVID. Many Bishops, such as Archbishop Daniel Cardinal DiNardo in Houston, have advocated that the faithful receive the vaccine, following guidance from the USCCB and

¹⁴ See chapter 2 & 3 or "Code of Canon Law - Book IV - The Function of the Church - Part I. (Cann. 920)."; "Code of Canon Law - Book II - The People of God - Part I. (Cann. 897 - 958)."

the Pope.¹⁵ However, in some circles, these vaccines have posed ethical questions that the church has been compelled to address.¹⁶ In recommending that the faithful are vaccinated the Pope and local officials have followed a similar pattern of thinking to that already discussed, deeming any of the vaccines permissible as a protection for the broader community and as part of the faithful's duty to preserve human life. In a statement released in December, the USCCB says that the faithful 'cannot omit fulfilling serious obligations such as the prevention of deadly infection and the spread of contagion among those who are vulnerable" just to avoid the appearance of complying with unethical or evil practices.¹⁷ This stance clearly highlights the regard that modern Church leaders have for the community and ethical behavior. This understanding of community good is not drastically different from the ethical considerations church leaders espoused during previous pandemics, but it does leave many with questions about how to handle the newest peak in COVID cases.

Beyond the potential evolution in Catholic care that the Catholic COVID response represents, there are other compelling questions to consider. Namely, the logistics of transitioning back to in-person mass. Across the country, many planned back-to-mass transitions have been disrupted by the emergence of the Delta variant and the ensuing case surge. In the Archdiocese of Washington, masks are now required for all in-person gatherings, but for the time being, in-person mass is still permitted. This renewed

¹⁵ "Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston Health Updates," Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://www.archgh.org/healthupdates/>.

¹⁶ There has been some concern about the cell lines used in vaccine testing and development, especially in the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. Many assert that cell lines derived from aborted fetuses were used, making the vaccine ethically compromised.

¹⁷ "Moral Considerations Regarding the New COVID-19 Vaccines," USCCB, December 2020, <https://www.usccb.org/resources/moral-considerations-covid-vaccines.pdf>.

requirement was issued in compliance with local government regulation, but because such regulation varies across the country different Archdiocese must respond differently to each situation. In most locales, this means acting in accordance with local mandates, but in some places, Bishops have chosen to require masks at mass despite there being no mask mandate in effect.¹⁸ Bishops in these areas base their rationale on public safety and a duty to the communal good, but interpretations of what is best for the common good vary between parishes and can conflict between the different moral obligations of the believer, namely the obligation to attend mass in conflict with the obligation to protect the community. This disjointed national COVID policy will likely lead to certain dioceses returning to mass and community activities much sooner than others, potentially affecting the long-term impact of the Church's COVID response. While it remains to be seen if parishes that have been able to return to pre-pandemic activities sooner have had more success in fostering community like Christians of previous centuries, this situation merits further study. Regardless of how Church leaders move to address the Delta variant, their actions will likely set a precedent for what future clergy will do when faced with the next pandemic.

When considering all aspects of the Catholic response to COVID it becomes clear that the response has been rooted in social teaching and represents a continuation of care for the sick. However, COVID has also highlighted a myriad of social inequalities and has motivated Church leaders at many levels to act to remedy them. Despite the uncertainty and potential for politicization that the newest COVID variant poses, the

¹⁸ Kevin Clarke, "Should We Go Back to Masks at Mass? Some U.S. Bishops Say Yes," *America Magazine*, August 5, 2021, <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2021/08/05/mask-mass-public-safety-us-bishops-covid-delta-wave-pandemic-241177>.

Church's prolonged focus on meeting the needs of the community throughout the pandemic has created a framework for continued outreach in a post-COVID world. Whether or not Francis' vision of a more compassionate and interconnected world post-pandemic will actually be realized remains to be seen, the infrastructure that was enhanced during this pandemic will be available to those who seek to use it. Regardless of the long-lasting impacts of COVID response for applying social teaching, it is important to acknowledge that COVID itself had a significant impact on faith communities around the world. Adapting engagement and continuously working to be in compliance with health and safety mandates was difficult for many parishes and more research should be done to examine how and why communities do or do not recover from the pandemic once it is possible to do so. Understanding the impacts of the Catholic COVID response is just as important as understanding the response and its shaping factors. This thesis will act as an explanation of what has already occurred in anticipation of future research.

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