



When Faith and Health Collide: Expressions of Faith Over the Dangers of COVID-19 by Selected Flagellants in the Philippines

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Abstract

For almost three years, the COVID-19 pandemic seriously affected society. Mass gatherings were restricted during the surge, including religious activities and other public practices. However, some Filipinos opted to continue their *panata* (sacred vow) of self-flagellation during this health crisis, thus putting themselves at risk of being inflicted with the virus or being a spreader. This article explores the experience of selected flagellants who continued to fulfill their religious practice amid the pandemic. It draws inspiration from their narratives about their personal experiences of how they faced, struggled, and hoped to battle the “unseen” virus and the criticisms of others for what they did. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), their interview transcripts elicit three recurrent themes: Suffering leads to finding God for support, sacred vow as unity to Christ’s suffering, and spiritual reward over physical pain. These themes can contribute to future research on how opposing parties should negotiate when faith and health conflict.

Keywords COVID-19 pandemic · *Panata* · Religious experience · Self-flagellation · Suffering

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Introduction

Nobody can stop me from doing this, not even COVID-19! This remark was the firm response of one of the study participants when asked about the possibility of getting infected with the virus if he continues doing his *panata* of self-flagellation amid the existing health crisis. A *panata* is a religious or sacred vow whereby the devotee promises to do a sacrifice for their faith in hopes of being rewarded by the divine response to his prayers (Tiatco & Bonifacio-Ramolete, 2008). Many devout Filipino Catholics, especially in Metro Manila, Pampanga, Bulacan, and Tarlac, practice different kinds of *panata*. Among the popular *panata* include joining the annual processions of the Black Nazarene (Quiapo) and Sto. Niño (Tondo); various novenas to the Virgin Mary, such as the Our Mother of Perpetual Help and the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and other devotions to particular saints like St. Jude, Padre Pio, and San Lorenzo Ruiz.

These Filipino devotees have common reasons for fulfilling their *panata*—seeking God’s mercy to forgive their sins, asking God to grant their prayer requests, and simply as validation for being faithful Catholics by sharing in the suffering of Jesus Christ. Self-flagellation or *pagpe-penitensya* (a popular term used in Tarlac province) is categorized here. Self-flagellation or *pamagdarame* (a term used in the Pampanga province) has various ways—the carrying of crosses (*mamasan krus*), bleeding and whipping their backs (*mamalaspas*), crawling on hot pavement and dirty roads (*magsalibatbat*), and nailing on the cross (*Kristos*) (Sarmiento et al., 2017). Some people understand the reasons for doing such a *panata* since everyone has their own unique religious experience. However, others find it unreasonable and absurd, especially given the situation where the entire world is dealing with the health crisis caused by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Thus, the question, “Is faith (religious expression) more valuable than health?” makes this paper more interesting.

COVID-19 Versus the Panata

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The condition was unknown before the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. The Canadian Health authorities declared the first “presumptive” confirmed case of the deadly coronavirus in a resident who had returned from Wuhan (Thomas & Nair, 2020). It was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. A pandemic is an epidemic occurring over a vast area, crossing international boundaries, and usually affecting many people (Porta, 2014).

In the Philippines, the health authorities investigated the first suspected case on January 22, 2020, and reported 633 more cases as of March 1, 2020 (Edrada et al., 2020). With the quick spread of the virus, the government responded with the National Action Plan (NAP) against COVID-19, which provides a national strategy that prescribes guidelines on how to contain and prevent the spread and ultimately eliminate the threat of the disease. Its ultimate goal is to safeguard the Filipinos and mitigate the social, economic, and security impact brought about by the pandemic.

One of the strategic actions is the implementation of lockdowns or community quarantine to immobilize potential carriers, limit contagion to localized scale, and allow contact tracing and tracking (Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases, 2020). With more than 3 years of NAP's implementation, physical or social distancing has become one of the minimum health protocols imposed to avoid spreading the virus. Despite the initiative, the lack of preparedness for a pandemic which include surveillance and testing capacity, in particular, had left the country poorly defended against the new virus and its serious effects (Amit et al., 2021).

It is worth noting that within those three years, some flagellants did not heed the health protocol and continued to practice self-flagellation every Holy Week, especially during Good Fridays of the Lenten season. When the initial cases of COVID-19 were detected in the country last March 2020, the government halted public gatherings across most of the country, and church doors were shut to the public, prompting the faithful to turn to live-streamed Masses. After a month of celebrating Holy Week, the Philippines has reported 4,076 COVID-19 infections—207 of whom have died.

The Panata During the Pandemic Years

However, in that same year, 2020, some penitents were still flagellating themselves in front of the Quiapo Church (Toledo, 2020). After a year, 2021, the health situation in the country got more serious. The government extended the period of a State of Calamity throughout the nation due to COVID-19. As of January 2021, there were 20,292 active cases, ballooning to 2,834,775 with 49,386 deaths in December 2021 (WHO, 2021). Despite the difficult situation, about ten devotees were seen near a church in the Tondo area, wearing facemasks and, with the cloth cut away from the backs, struck their backs with bamboo whips swung rhythmically from left to right as they walked. Barefooted and with backs bloodied by repeated flogging, these devotees defied a ban on gatherings on Good Friday to perform a self-flagellation ritual as a means of atonement during Holy Week (Reuters, 2021).

For last year, 2022, as of December 19, there were already 4,056,239 cases with 65,064 deaths (WHO, 2022). WHO-Philippines is at its peak with its vaccination campaign but still imposing the minimum health protocols despite the massive vaccine rollout. Surprisingly, the festive celebration of Good Friday, last April 15, 2022, continued with scores of men—their faces covered—walking barefoot as they flogged themselves with bamboo whips under a blazing sun in Navotas, Metro Manila, while others carried wooden crosses (Lopez, 2022). For this year, 2023, though there have been 4,070,287 COVID-19 cases for January, the recoveries were already 3,992,554. The trend of reported cases in the Philippines is decreasing (WHO, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c).

Furthermore, as of July 10–16, 2023, there were only 1,938 new cases. Metro Manila is still under Alert Level 1, which means restrictions remain in the status quo. The IATF-EID added that the local government units have the jurisdiction to require specific health protocols like social distancing and wearing face masks

in their communities through local ordinances (Montemayor, 2023). Despite the restrictions, the flagellants were still indefatigably and faithfully being witnessed by the public, fulfilling their *panata*. The researchers consider this the opportune time to interview the selected flagellants in Paniqui, province of Tarlac, which is almost a 3 h from Metro Manila (Fig. 1).

Within these almost three years of the COVID-19 pandemic, the flagellants' faith did not waver. They all the more actualized their intense devotion to God with their Catholic faith, carrying with them different reasons that may be unacceptable in health and safety. The WHO reiterated that the spread of the virus is possible from an infected person's mouth or nose in small liquid particles when they cough, sneeze, speak, sing, or breathe. These particles range from larger respiratory droplets to smaller aerosols. One should practice physical distancing by staying at least 1 m apart from others for protection (WHO, 2023b).

The flagellants could either get infected or spread the virus since they did many physical movements and public interaction during those three years of the pandemic. Are they not afraid of the dreaded disease? What motivates them to continue the practice of flagellation amid the health crisis? Can we consider them idols of the Catholic faith or simply illogical fanatics just aiming for public attention? Is faith more valuable than health for these devotees? These are the interesting questions that this paper attempts to explore. The researchers hope to present a non-biased perspective of the flagellants' Lenten practice and leave the judgment to the readers and other researchers for other interesting insights about the intersection between faith and health.



Fig. 1 Selected flagellants of Paniqui, Tarlac, Philippines, were seen flogging themselves in the different streets of the town last April 7, 2023 (Good Friday, Holy Week)

The Intersection Between Faith and Health: Complementarity or Conflicting?

Faith generally refers to confidence and trust in a person, thing, or God/Higher Being (G/HB), even without total proof. Regarding religion, it refers to a belief in G/HB and all the other doctrines it teaches. It is often presented as the foundation of religion and spirituality and considered one of its most essential elements valued and aimed to be nurtured, deepened, or strengthened. Having faith gives that sense of direction and helps one to discover the purpose/meaning of life. On the other hand, health is also of great value, like faith. It is a complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. The achievement of any State in promoting and protecting health is of value to all (WHO, 2023c). What, then, is the connection between faith/religion and health? Are they in conflict or complementary?

Faith, as a component of religion, predicts health and can encourage healthy behavior (Moll, 2023). The religion we belong to tells us that cultivating our faith is necessary, and one way of practicing it is through obedience to the different moral teachings, including taking care of our overall health. The Catholic Church teaches that our bodies are sacred. St. Paul emphasized this, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God?...” (1 Corinthians 6:20). Avoiding vices, which are bad habits, such as alcohol, tobacco, prohibited drugs, and pornography prevents physical and mental health problems. At the same time, spiritual practices like yoga, meditations, pilgrimages, worship through singing and dancing, and others can contribute to the person’s well-being. In a related study, expressions of faith, such as frequent attendance to religious services, were associated with significantly lower risk of all-cause, cardiovascular, and cancer mortality among women (Li et al., 2016).

Concerning mental health, religion provides resources for coping with stress that evoke positive emotions and reduce stress. It can prevent emotional disorders such as depression, anxiety disorder, suicide, and substance abuse. It can provide an optimistic worldview that may involve a personal transcendental force or any higher being who loves and cares about humans and is responsive to their needs (Koenig, 2012). In the best of circumstances, it can inspire people to view or handle a difficult situation in a certain way; it can bring solace in challenging circumstances; it has the power to transform suffering (Kroesbergen-Kamps, 2024). This is where the importance of prayer comes into play and is considered a powerful tool to address problematic situations. Also, a study highlighted that among 89,708 women aged 30–55, frequent religious service attendance was associated with a significantly lower rate of suicide (VanderWeele et al., 2016). Thus, our faith, as expressed in our obedience to religious teachings, directs our goal of attaining good health. On the contrary, when we neglect and become “unfaithful” to these religious teachings, possible problems may arise that can affect our well-being.

Health also affects faith in different ways. If one is physically and mentally healthy, religious obligations can be actively fulfilled, thus increasing the sense

of “faith” in the person. Having a sound mind and body also motivates the person to pray more, acknowledging and appreciating the “goodness” of the transcendent for providing the necessary graces that one needs. However, practicing one’s faith is difficult if one is sick since one cannot fulfill religious obligations. But of course, it does not follow since one can still be “faithful” even if they are confined at the hospital but is religiously in constant communication with the transcendent. Some Catholic saints and martyrs found solace in God, like Juliana Falconieri, the patron of people suffering from chronic illness, and Lorenzo Ruiz de Manila, who was tortured first before being killed for defending his faith.

Faith or religion can also conflict with health. One of the identifying elements of a particular religion is its doctrines as expressed in its norms, rules, regulations, and guidelines. Some health issues like reproductive rights, sex education, legalization of substances like marijuana, and others are against the teachings of some religions, especially the Catholic Church.

In the Philippines, one of the highly debatable issues is using artificial birth control methods such as condoms and pills. The local Catholic Church highly opposes its legalization, and even if it has passed into law, many Catholics still adhere to the Church’s teaching on its immorality. Low condom use placed the country as the fastest-growing human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) epidemic in the Western Pacific region. From 2012 to 2023, there was a 411% increase in daily incidence (Gangcuangco & Eustaquio, 2023).

Concerning this, the non-contraceptive practice also gives rise to the booming cases of teenage pregnancy, placing the country under a national social emergency. Teenage pregnancy drives malnutrition because a teenager’s body is not physically ready to bear a child. Adolescent mothers aged 10–19 years face a higher risk of eclampsia, puerperal endometritis, and systemic infections than women aged 20–24 years, and babies of adolescent mothers face higher risks of low birth weight, preterm birth, and severe neonatal conditions (National Nutrition Council, 2023).

In this paper, the religiosity and faith expression of the selected flagellants were outside the bounds of public health since they do not generally adhere to the minimum health protocols during the health crisis. However, we must also look at it in the context of culture and social relationships. The *panata* that flagellants’ do are seen as a guiding principle for everyday life and a reflection of structural vulnerability. These devotional activities are also a way of life to build cooperative communities, promote authentic moral behavior, and empower the structurally vulnerable (Sto. Domingo et al., 2020). Restrictive religious attitudes and faith expressions can conflict with some health issues and practices. In times like this, more dialogue and discussions are needed to determine which is of more excellent value and beneficial for the common good.

Data and Methods

Data

The primary data of this study come from the transcripts of interviews conducted with the six selected Filipino flagellants in Paniqui, Tarlac, Philippines. This

purposive sample was chosen based on the common characteristics—affiliated with the Catholic religion and belief in its fundamental doctrines; have awareness and belief that COVID-19 is a severe and infectious disease; and, most of all, have been practicing flagellation as their *panata* for a consecutive number of years already. Four participants are whipping and bleeding their backs, while the others carry heavy crosses. One of the researchers is a relative of one of the study participants, which is also why the researcher did not find any difficulty contacting other participants since they are familiar with one another. The interview was done individually during the Holy Week of 2023, mainly during the days when they finished fulfilling their *panata*. It was also this year when COVID-19 cases were already decreasing, but there were still public health protocols and other restrictions. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the participants. Their real names were anonymized for privacy reasons.

Method

This study involved qualitative research with an in-depth analysis of participants' interview transcripts to achieve this research's aims. The six participants were interviewed individually on separate occasions and in a convenient setting for each of them. After each process, the researcher took notes and read the interview transcript for the participant's approval. Tagalog was the dialect used since it is understandable to both parties. It was later translated into English for data analysis. There was an initial casual conversation before the interview to establish rapport between the researcher and the interviewee. There was much exchange of stories since both parties are local inhabitants of the town. After that, the study's nature and ethical considerations were explained well to the participants.

The researchers asked the following basic questions to each participant:

1. What does this practice of self-flagellation or fulfilling your *panata* mean?
2. How well do you know about COVID-19 and its profound effects? Are you not afraid of getting infected with the virus or its spreader if you have it while fulfilling the *panata*?

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of participants

Participant	Age	Civil status	Educational attainment	Occupation	# of years of doing flagellation
1	24	Married	HS graduate	Tricycle driver	5
2	21	Single	Elementary graduate	Construction worker	3
3	33	Married	HS undergraduate	Construction worker	10
4	40	Married	Elementary graduate	Cockpit worker	15
5	22	Single	HS undergraduate	Messenger	4
6	42	Married	HS undergraduate	Security guard	17

3. What motivates you to continue the practice of self-flagellation amid the risks of getting infected with COVID-19 or being its spreader?

These formulated questions utilized a face value validity check which is an informal review of a questionnaire by non-experts, who assess its clarity, comprehensibility, and appropriateness for the participants. It is usually based on the researchers' subjective judgment. These questions are adequate to evoke the general insights and sentiments of the participants regarding their *panata*. However, further validation could be employed in measuring the credibility of the questions. There were also follow-up questions asked to the participants every time there were answers that needed clarification.

This study utilized one of the popular qualitative data analysis tools—*interpretative phenomenological analysis* (IPA). The IPA focuses on examining how individuals make meaning of their life experiences. This is basically the reason why IPA suits the study context. In IPA, a detailed analysis of personal accounts followed by presenting and discussing the generic experiential themes is typically paired with the researcher's interpretation, an expression of double hermeneutics in practice. IPA synthesizes ideas from phenomenology and hermeneutics, resulting in a descriptive method because it is concerned with how things appear and letting things speak for themselves, and an interpretative because it recognizes there is no such thing as an uninterpreted phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). With regard to the participants, they described their deepest experiences of the practice and how it affected their life in general. In the same way, they also interpret or put meaning into these experiences and relate them to their present relationship with God. IPA also emphasizes that the research exercise is a dynamic process with an active role for the researcher. One tries to get close to the participant's world from an "insider's perspective." Thus, the participants are trying to make sense of their world while the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world (Smith & Osborne, 2007). In relation to this, as researchers, we did not simply interview the participants and made a conclusion that what they do is a menace to public health. Instead, we dug deeper into their own "world" and looked into the sociocultural aspect of their practice. This is what IPA is all about, we played an active role and tried our best to understand the participants' experiences from a holistic perspective.

As mentioned, this study has six participants, which is sufficient enough as a sample. Turpin et al. (1997) emphasized that six to eight participants are appropriate for an IPA study as this size allows for examining similarities and differences between individuals. The transcripts of the interview had undergone the four stages of IPA. Formulated by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), Table 2 shows the basic IPA guidelines.

This study utilized all the IPA stages. It followed the first three stages of the tool, while the fourth stage was integrated into the Results and Discussion section, where the clustered themes were described and discussed thoroughly.

Table 2 Basic guidelines of IPA and brief descriptions

Stages of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)	Brief descriptions
Stage 1: Multiple reading and making notes	Close reading of the transcript several times to immerse in the data; making notes about one's observations and reflections about the interview experience or any other thoughts and comments of potential significance; highlighting distinctive phrases and emotional responses
Stage 2: Transforming notes into Emergent Themes	Reflecting on the source material to transform notes into emerging themes; formulating a concise phrase (themes) at a slightly higher level of abstraction, which may refer to a more psychological conceptualization
Stage 3: Seeking relationships and clustering themes	Looking for connections between emerging themes, grouping them according to conceptual similarities, and providing each cluster with a descriptive label; dropping of "unfit" themes; listing of recurrent themes and subthemes, and relevant short extracts from the transcript
Stage 4: Writing a narrative account of the study	Taking the themes identified in the final table and writing them up one by one, describing each theme and exemplifying it with extracts from the interview, followed by analytic comments from the author/s

Ethical Considerations

The procedures performed in this study were performed following the framework of the basic ethical guidelines in human research from a high-ranked national university. An informed consent was obtained from the participants, enabling them to fully understand the nature of the study and what they agreed to, including the potential risks and benefits of the interview. The researchers reiterated the participant's right to withdraw from the research project at any time without penalty. There is also complete anonymity, which means that the participants are not identifiable, including complete confidentiality of their personal information. Their real names were replaced with participant numbers. Those who consented to the interview were asked to suggest a convenient date, time, and place. The pictures used in this study were also personal shots of the researchers during the participants' procession of their self-flagellation. All the sources were also correctly cited and credited in the References section.

Results and Discussion

As shown in Fig. 2 and Table 3, the IPA resulted in three clustered themes, which were extracted from the interview transcripts. It is important to note that the emerging themes are the specific subthemes derived from the exploratory

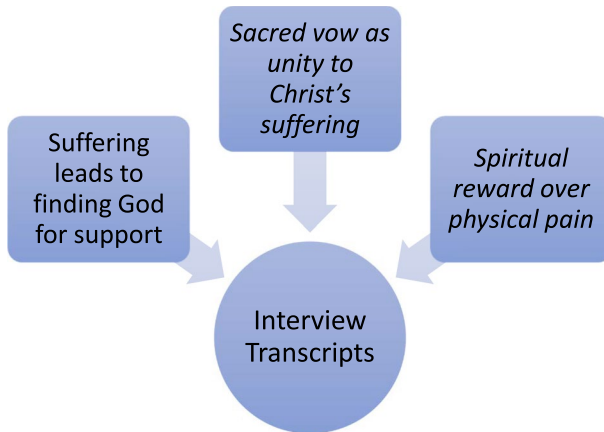


Fig. 2 An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of the clustered themes arising from the interview transcripts

Table 3 Emerging and clustered themes after using IPA

Emerging themes	Clustered themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sick and suffering relatives and friends • Seeking financial assistance • Personal and family protection from COVID-19 and all harms 	1. Suffering leads to finding God for support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christ suffered, and so do I • Sacrifice pleases God • Validation of Filipino Christian values 	2. Sacred vow (<i>panata</i>) as unity to Christ's suffering
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temporary versus eternity • Mercy and forgiveness as precious reward • God's grace outweighs bodily pain 	3. Spiritual reward over physical pain

notes. These themes are essential in the analysis since they contribute to tracing the overall picture of the participants' experience. On the other hand, the clustered themes epitomize the prevalent realities and general concepts that describe the participants' personal experiences. The clustered themes include—*Suffering leads to finding God for support*, a *Sacred vow as unity to Christ's suffering*, and *Spiritual reward over physical pain*.

Table 3 presents the three clustered themes extracted from the emerging themes. The emerging themes comprise another set of three extracted phrase concepts from the exploratory notes/transcript of the interview. It is important to note that, as discussed in the stages of IPA, the researchers determine the connections between the highlighted exploratory notes and emerging themes. The results were then grouped to form the clustered themes. The “unfit” or not related themes were dropped.

Suffering leads to finding God for support

I am doing this for my mother, who has cancer. She has been suffering for many years already. If only her illness can be passed on to me, I would gladly accept it... Sometimes, I talk to God, why does it have to be my mother? She is a very kind person. Sometimes, I have doubts if God listens to our prayers... But still... I know, and I have high hopes that God will heal my mother. This is for her...— Participant #4

If it is your time to die, nobody can stop it! COVID is just around the corner... I believe that I am strong enough not to acquire the virus. What is more important now is to ask for God's assistance for all our needs, especially since we need money for my family since I lost my Job because of this pandemic. I also ask God for the protection of my family because I do not know what to do if any of my kids or my wife get the virus. I hope this pandemic ends so that I can work again...— Participant #6

Participant #4 was teary-eyed as he blurted out how painful it was to see his mother have the dreaded cancer. For him, the presence of God in their life is hardly felt, especially during the pandemic. They were already experiencing a financial burden because of the expensive essential medicine for his mother, and the situation became more complicated when *sabong* (cockfighting) came to a halt, thus ending his Job as a cockpit worker. There is not much support from others, even their relatives, so all he can do is turn to God as his last hope. He thought of doing self-flagellation to please God and grant his petitions. The hope is still there, flickering during uncertain times, begging God to heal the ailing mother miraculously.

In the same way, participant #4 needed to search for God and ask for even a bit and parcel of a solution to his family's financial constraints. Coupled with this petition is the plea that none of his family members will acquire the virus. He knew the possible consequences of doing his *panata* with his health amid the pandemic. Nonetheless, in crucial situations such as the dire need to fill his family's empty stomach, the danger posed by COVID-19 would not matter much.

The two participants may seem lost, and they need to search for God, whom they believe is their last resort, to address what they need. They are like the prophet Job in the Christian Bible. Job is a wealthy and upright man blessed extensively by God with a large family and extensive flocks. His faith was tested, and he lost everything, which led to confusion, and he demanded an explanation from God for the many suffering in his life. Likewise, he was lost momentarily and longed for God's presence amid the suffering. In the structure of the suffering and tribulation of the innocent (Job), there is a God who sees. It is not an effort to construct an indecisive identity of unbearable suffering from God's (in)audible speech, which even God does not pay attention to. We simply cannot respond to the suffering of the world and the community. The meaning of individual suffering is found in the experience and breaking of God's silence and one's own hope in listening to his response (Mijatović, 2021).

Nevertheless, the participants and Job found solace and comfort with God at the end of the day. Job received more blessings than before. The participants may have

yet to receive immediate answers to their petitions. However, they have found support from God, which helped them to accept the situation and motivated them never to lose hope.

Many people suffered in various forms during the pandemic. It is important to note that human beings do not only suffer from somatic illnesses, physical pain, and the lack of decent opportunities to satisfy their basic vital, social, and emotional needs. They also suffer when they cannot experience and grasp any meaning of life, even if such suffering is not quite as apparent as most forms of physical, social, and emotional suffering (Diehl, 2009). The health crisis caused the death of millions of people, left an economic catastrophe, disrupted the educational system, and inflicted severe physical and mental health concerns on almost everyone. During this time, the need to take care of the citizens' mental health has intensified. This necessity aggravated due to the experiences of the individuals that led some to trauma, anxiety, and depression. Unfortunately, some of the mental health issues resulted to cases of suicide (Gozum & Gutierrez, 2023). Even healthcare workers like nurses suffered from moral distress and moral injury which needed urgent attention (Berdida & Grande, 2023).

Suffering is said to be inevitable. It is the result of a fallen world, and COVID-19 is a part of it. Instead of blaming God for allowing such an unfortunate reality or others to abuse his free will and disrupt the order of nature, the more sensible attitude is finding concrete ways to face it (Cordero, 2021). Humans tend to find solace and a source of support from someone or something amid suffering. Relatives, friends, or other concerned people can be a source for this need. Others may find pet/plant parenting, engaging in different exercises, cooking, vlogging, and others as practical activities to ease suffering.

However, when nobody and nothing seems available to render support, God or any Higher Being can be the last resort. Lifting to God even our suffering, through prayer, can lighten the burden in one's mind and heart from the negative effects of the pandemic (Cordero, 2022). This previous resort supersedes other values, such as health, since what is more important is the severe current condition of one's family. This is why the participants of this study opted to please God through self-flagellation rather than think about any health consequences posed by the pandemic. The hierarchy of needs varies for every person, affecting which values are preferred over others. The physical demands of the participants, such as food and financial means, need immediate satisfaction. These needs must be addressed first before their health concerns. However, it does not mean that other concerns will be set aside, but the here-and-now situation is more prioritized.

Sacred vow (*panata*) as unity to Christ's suffering

My family is a devout Catholic. It has been a tradition for us to offer sacrifices, especially during Holy Week. My uncles and cousins used to flagellate also, while other relatives used to read the *pasyong mahal* or do the *visita iglesia*. It is our way of being one with Christ in his suffering and showing him gratitude for what He has done for us. We know that God will be pleased with what we

do, and I am sure God will protect us from any harm, especially COVID-19.

— Participant #3

This Holy Week is a season to pay tribute to Christ for saving and redeeming us... Filipinos take to heart their identity as Christians... being followers of Christ. We Filipinos are God-fearing people, compassionate, grateful, patient, merciful, and most of all, we are humble enough to accept our mistakes and be sorry for all our past sins. — Participant #5

Being faithful followers of Jesus Christ entails various forms of suffering and sacrifices. The high value given to one's faith in Christ is always part of the habitual routine for Participant #3 and his whole family. He ensures that no Good Friday will pass without fulfilling his *panata*, even with the existing health crisis. He firmly believes that through the humble act of sacrifice of self-flagellation, God is pleased, and the feeling of being worthy to be called a "Christian" is achieved. Participant #3, on the same note, values so much every Lenten season. It is the opportune time to show God how we are as God-fearing people and what it takes to become a Filipino Christian in any situation, even during a pandemic. He wants to brag about the deeply rooted qualities of Filipinos concerning their faith in God and love for their neighbor. Thus, he repeatedly mentioned virtues that every Filipino should be proud of.

If there is one thing that marks the Filipinos' identity as being religious, it is the fact that they will always perform their respective *panata* at all costs. While it is true that the pandemic momentarily stopped many public gatherings, such as religious ones, many devotees still find their own creative and even "secret" ways to actualize their traditions. The interesting question is, what is the significance of *panata* in the life of every involved Filipino Christian? The definite answer points out the validation of Christian values that Filipinos naturally possessed, which is witnessed in some ways.

First, the *panata* acts as an avenue for the devotee to express *damay at pakiiisa* (empathy and unity) to the sufferings of Jesus Christ, who offered his own life for humanity's salvation. *Damay* (empathy) is a typical trait that is characterized by the actual translation of felt compassion into action (Cordero, 2019), while *pakiiisa* (unity) is the quality of belonging or being one with the one suffering. During the height of the pandemic, many Filipinos have expressed *damay at pakikiisa* through organizing community pantries which offer free foods for the needy up to composing songs of hope to alleviate stress caused by the disease (Aja et al., 2021).

Participant #3 shows *damay at pakiiisa* to Christ's suffering through the physical and mental processes of undergoing the painful practice of self-flagellation, combined with the assistants' whips, kicks, spits, and slight cutting of his back with razor blades. The flagellants "impersonate" Christ, who is whipped severely, carried the cross to the calvary, and then crucified. Other devotees known as *Kristos* go as far as public crucifixion, especially in Cutud, San Fernando City, province of Pampanga. The *Kristos* are nailed on the cross and portray the role of Jesus Christ during *Senakulo* (Passion plays). During the performance of the crucifixion, a flagellant may undergo the internalization of being like Christ to perform the character of Jesus depicted in the passion play (Sibug et al., 2021).

At the individual level, as suffering can be seen as negative since it is a consequence of sin by human beings, it can be redeemed to accomplish God's loving purposes in the world, and to shape individual believers to become more like Jesus. Jesus is the savior who can sympathize with suffering because of his own experience of suffering; he is considered the unparalleled model for how to suffer (McMartin et al., 2020).

Second, other flagellants also treat the *panata* as a way to convey *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) for the numerous blessings bestowed upon them by God. Since time immemorial, Filipinos have never failed to acknowledge and appreciate the intervention of *Bathala/Maykapal* (Supreme Being) in their everyday life. *Bathala* was said to be the creator of all things, sustainer, keeper, nourisher, and protector of humanity. Sometimes, he seemed very human, welcomed gifts from people with deep appreciation, and was pleased when men were helpful and obedient to his moral laws. He was lavish in his love toward those who kept his commandments and paid him homage (Landa, 1968).

Third, connected with the sense of *utang na loob* is *takot sa Diyos* (fear of God). It is important to note that this fear does not refer to the notion that God is a punishing deity. Thus, people must always obey his teachings, or they will be punished. However, it is the perspective that a person is afraid of committing sins because they know these immoral acts will offend God, who is the source of all good things. The participants have experienced committing different sorts of immoralities, and none of these sins pleased God. Despite their sinfulness, God remained faithful to them, given that they still live with their families and receive graces in many ways. Being afraid and hesitant to commit more sins serves as one of their guiding principles to renew their lives and strengthen their faith.

With all the traits embedded in the participants' humanity, one might conclude that the possible adverse health effects of what they do are taken for granted. However, we must look at it from a broader perspective by considering their personal beliefs. The researchers believe that the *panata* of participants, especially the notion of "uniting oneself in the sufferings of Christ," compensate for the dangers posed by the pandemic. The participants' suffering by fulfilling their *panata* is enough to please God. They have total trust and confidence that God will protect them from COVID-19 and, at the same time, ensure the safety of the people around them. It may be unacceptable to others, but we give them the benefit of the doubt.

Spiritual reward over physical pain

Whenever I hit my back and have it bleed, I do not feel much pain. Maybe it is because God is always behind me... Who am I to complain because Christ also suffered more than I do? I also know that I will be rewarded with what I do... maybe more blessings or graces... Maybe my prayers will be answered... I don't know... I'm not sure. All I'm sure of is that God helps me to get through the pain, and something is prepared for me after this... — Participant #2

Nobody can stop me from doing this, not even COVID-19! I'm doing this to at least lessen my guilt from my past mistakes so that God will be merciful. I

still hope to end up in heaven when the time comes... When I decided to stop being a bad person, I knew God would give me another chance...and so... the pain is acceptable for me as long as I can fulfill my promise to God, it will not matter.. — Participant #1

Sadly, some people criticize us and think we are just seeking public attention. They need help understanding what we do. We sacrifice our bodies for serious reasons. We do this for ourselves and because we want the COVID-19 pandemic to end! I'm sure that God is listening to our prayers... Yes, God is always here, helping us to get through this...— Participant #5

The three participants have one thing in common as they narrate their respective experiences regarding self-flagellation—the superiority of reward over physical pain. The rewards like forgiveness and mercy from God, a chance for life's renewal, protection from all harm, and even the promise of heaven for the sincere repentant are more precious than the experience of bodily pain during self-flagellation. The researcher also observed the passionate tone of the participants as the interview progressed. He sensed the sincerity of each participant, as seen in their facial expressions and physical gestures. The participants also repeatedly mentioned the notion of a “reward” or what they can get out of this *panata*.

It is a natural inclination for Christians to express hope after the painful experiences of suffering. The reason is rooted in what the Church teaches concerning the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ—His suffering, death, and resurrection. Christ's rising from the dead gives us the hope that we will resurrect after our earthly life to be with God in His kingdom. This eternal life is the greatest reward that we are longing for. A “reward” is given in return for a good thing done, a service rendered, or some merit earned (Gerig, 1996). It motivates us to do our best to achieve that goal, even risking one's life. The interesting question is, “Are we just offering sacrifice because of the impending reward from God? It seems we are putting “conditions” on how God should respond to our pleas and petitions.

Clarifying the concept of “reward” may help us understand the personal sentiments of our participants. Blumer (2011) explains using rewards as motivation for several reasons. We chose three of these reasons. First, God uses reward motivation frequently, as found in the gospels, especially during the Beatitudes account, “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...” (Mat. 5:3–12). The epistles also use reward motivation, “They anticipate the crowns God will give to His faithful, obedient children (James 1:12, 1 Cor. 9:25, 1 Pet. 5:4).” They also speak of reward at the judgment, where we will receive what is consistent with our works “whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10). If our work endures, we “will receive a reward” (1 Cor. 3:13). Second, the desire of humans is simply a feature of human nature, not necessarily fallen human nature. We have a basic form of self-love that is neither sinful nor hostile to our love for God. Third, it is entirely proper to honor people for their achievements. Honoring them through rewards boosts their self-confidence to perform better and exert their total capacity to be at their best.

Lastly, using the ascetic-mystic Christian tradition, Teresa of Avila's desire for suffering or physical pain cannot be interpreted as a mere passive assumption of a feminine sacrificial role. On the contrary, she was able to transform her suffering

into the incarnated performance of her relationship with God which is considered a precious reward. By desiring and understanding suffering and her ability to confront it as proof of divine love, she was able to reinforce her self-confidence and strength (Bueno-Gómez, 2019). Her mystical experience is described below:

In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it, nor will one's soul be content with anything less than God. It is not bodily pain, but spiritual, though the body has a share in it -- indeed, a great share. So sweet are the colloquies of love which pass between the soul and God that if anyone thinks I am lying I beseech God, in His goodness, to give him the same experience. (Teresa of Jesus, 1946)

The participants of this study fulfill their *panata* regularly for rewards that are valid and not for selfish intentions. One of the significant petitions they pray to God is to end the pandemic for the sake of everyone else. When they experience physical pain because of the *panata*, it becomes incomparable to the ultimate joy they longed to receive afterward. It does not mean they enjoy being in pain like sadists but simply because their trust in God is overwhelming. It overpowers other kinds of uncomfortable sensations. In short, it is their own religious experience that only they can explain and grasp its meaning. James (1985) describes religious experience as an immediate awareness of and connection to God. This awareness blocks out everything else temporarily, perhaps even to the degree that the distinction between the person and what they are aware of disappears. This description validates the claim of the participants that sometimes they do not feel the physical pain anymore of self-flagellation because something "transcendent" is overpowering the uncomfortable feeling.

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of this study is the small cohort size. However, since this is a qualitative type of research and the data analysis tool utilized IPA, a small size of six is acceptable due to the in-depth nature of the study. The data were also obtained solely from a particular town in the province of Tarlac, Paniqui, and almost all the municipalities in the province have this kind of religious tradition during the Lenten season. Other provinces also have their *panata*, such as Metro Manila, Cebu, Bulacan, and Pampanga. Lastly, it is noticeable that all the participants have reached the basic education level, which is elementary or high school. There can be different and unique insights/experiences if the participants have attained or finished the college level.

Conclusion

More discussions and further research involving large samples and other settings are needed to comprehensively understand why the selected penitents opted to fulfill their *panata* amid the existing health crisis. However, from the perspective of public health, any form of public gathering and activity done with bodily exposure is risky and may cause serious health problems during a pandemic. Thus, the act of flagellation is unjustifiable and one can easily conclude that this religious practice is unreasonable and socially irresponsible. This stance supports the common good of everyone else.

On the other hand, the clustered themes extracted from the interview transcripts—*Suffering leads to finding God for support*, *Sacred vow as unity to Christ's suffering*, and *Spiritual reward over physical pain*, can partially lead us to grasp the participants' side. It is not that the penitents do not value their health or that of others, but their firm disposition to continue their *panata* overpowers the dangers posed by COVID-19. Their reason flows from the perspective that their sacrifice does not only benefit them but also for the good sake of others since God is pleased with their sacrifice. Thus, God may have mercy on everyone and hear the flagellants' "loud and bloody" petition to end the pandemic, which is, in turn, for the good of everybody.

When faith and health collide, there are specific considerations that must take place. The unifying element for conflicting parties must always be what will benefit the common good. There should be a sense of respect for one's beliefs, traditions, and culture. However, if this belief already endangers life, it is better to delay such practice until everything returns to normalcy. Any God or Higher Being always sees what is best for humanity and surely understands human affairs. In addition, there can also be creative and innovative ways of continuing such practices without losing their meaning and value but, at the same time, following the essential protocols for safety. It is a matter of open communication and humbly accepting one's limitations.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Human and Animal Rights This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by the author.

Informed Consent Informed consent was explained well and signed by all the participants.

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