

A New Religious Consciousness during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: New religions emerging in the lives of modern humans are a reaction to several changes related to the appreciation of people's faith. Pope Francis's call in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) is addressed to Bishops, Priests, Deacons, religious men and women, and the people of God regarding the proclamation of the Gospel to the contemporary world. This call arises due to various issues faced by hierarchs, pastoral workers, and the world's situation affecting evangelization and the appreciation of faith. The research problem formulation in this study is as follows: What is a new religion? Why are there new religious movements? The methodology used in this research involves library research, i.e., books, articles, journals that discuss themes related to the title of this article. In addition to using library methods, the study also employs critical reflection on new religions through interviews with several heads of families, specifically the faith experiences of Catholic families who tested positive for Covid-19 and Catholic families affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The main findings of the study are the role of the family in facing COVID-19, grounded in prayer, the word, and the Eucharist. Another finding is that technological advancements are continuously changing over time. This also influences family life. To respond to these changes, the importance of family faith in building a solid life is emphasized. By solid, it is meant adapting to changes without leaving God behind. God is the source of everything that happens in the universe.

INTRODUCTION

The call by Pope Francis in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* is directed towards Bishops, Priests, Deacons, religious men and women, and the People of God regarding the proclamation of the Gospel to the modern world. This call arises from various issues faced by the hierarchy, pastoral workers, and the global situation, which influence evangelization and the living out of faith, both personally and communally. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought significant changes to the entire world, including social relationships, and this inevitably affects various important aspects, including the practice of faith in religious life.

In this context, the encyclical issued by Pope Francis on *Evangelii Gaudium*, article 63, delves into the challenges posed by new religious movements and their impact on the lives of the faithful. The author explores this article by examining the phenomena currently experienced by humanity, particularly Catholic families during the Covid-19 pandemic. This paper will outline several issues related to new religious movements. The main research questions are: what are new religions? Why are there new religious movements? The aim of this research is to understand the influence of new religious movements in light of *Evangelii Gaudium* article 63 on the faith practice of believers. Additionally, it seeks to reflect on the impact of Covid-19

on the faith life of the faithful. New religious movements are closely related to advances in science and technology and their impact on evangelization.

To understand new religions, it is essential to know what religion is. If there are new religions, then there must have been old religions previously. This paper will discuss new and old religions. Before discussing new religions, it is necessary to address old or original religions. According to A. Sudiarja in his book "Agama di Jaman yang Berubah" (Religion in Changing Times), old or original religions are those adhered to by people today that do not align with contemporary times (Sudiarja, 2010). This means old religions are considered contrary to the faith of today's believers.

In this understanding, we look at the meaning of religion from the Christian tradition. The etymological meaning of religion comes from the Latin word "religio," which means to bind again, to gather so that it does not scatter. This meaning indicates that religion is closely associated with orderly activities, having the purpose of the Creator, who is God himself.

Pope Francis' encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* Article 63 addresses new religions, regarding the patterns and lifestyles of today that no longer follow the ways and patterns of previously existing religions, which are bound by regulations that are no longer relevant to modern times. New religious movements give birth to a fundamental reaction and spirituality without God by exalting rationalism, leading to movements of secularism and a style of consumerism, materialism, and individualism.

In EG. Art. 2, it is stated that "the great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Secularization rejects the transcendent" (EG, 64). The secularization referred to is a development oriented towards the world, human individuals, and their capabilities, which tend to be detached from the influence of religious authority.

These new religions present a new challenge in personal and communal life. In religion, new religions are associated with secularization. They are called new religions because their institutional structures differ from Christianity, including in the way they convey the Gospel message to others, which is the teaching of the Magisterium on the truth of the Catholic Christian faith. Examples of new religions include groups of rock music lovers or traditional culinary enthusiasts.

New religions arise due to various situations that influence human faith in Christ Jesus. In the history of faith practice, from one period to another, significant advances have led to the exaltation of reason. This can be seen in the historical development of religion and theology from the medieval period to the present. In the medieval period, theology was very influential concerning science. The Enlightenment period was characterized by the triumph of reason; reason surpassed faith and religion with the advancement of natural sciences. There was a significant contrast between the understanding of religion and theology in the medieval and Enlightenment periods.

During the medieval period, Christian religion was lived out as piety manifested in the lives of monks, hermits, and religious devotees. The Enlightenment era marked a stark contrast to the medieval period. Natural sciences became pioneers that emphasized the role of reason. Reason became the benchmark for testing everything, including one's faith experience. How did rationalism cause a shift in the faith experience of believers, to the extent that it could be considered a new religion? This question can be answered by stating that religion and theology can be accepted if they have been tested and proven through logic that can be verified for its truth. What is truth? In the book "Menjadi Mencintai", truth is the alignment of ideas with reality; the intended truth is reality (Riyanto, 2017). In other words, truth is considered true if it can be accepted by reason. The subsequent impact of new religious movements is individualism.

The advancement of science and technology in today's era has led to the emergence of secularism. Secularism is a mindset that prioritizes worldly interests and neglects spiritual or religious life. The intended secularization is a development oriented towards the world, individual humans, and their capabilities, which tend to be detached from the influence of religious authority.

One issue that must be encountered in cultural, political, and economic life is the clear separation from religious authority. This means that cultural, political, and other matters have no connection with religious issues. This is due to advancements or changes in social life with the advent of the French Revolution in 1789. Another impact of secularism is the development of economic life, pioneered by the industrial revolution in England in the 18th century.

The revolutions in France and England brought changes that could affect all aspects of human life. Specifically, in every field within society. Religion became one of the religious fields that its autonomy and authority originate from God or the transcendent and has no connection with other fields.

METHOD

This study uses a critical reflection methodology on new religious movements in relation to family faith practices during the Covid-19 pandemic, utilizing literature from books, articles, and personal faith experiences of those who have been infected with Covid-19 and those who directly faced patients infected with Covid-19. The research locus includes the perspectives of three family couples infected with Covid-19 in the Galang station, the Borong parish in Manggarai, Diocese of Ruteng, Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Faced with the technological advancements of today, families are experiencing significant changes in all aspects of life. A family is a small community built on the foundation of true love. The practice of this true love must always be supported by the spirit of faith, namely prayer, the practice of the Word, and the role of the Eucharist within the family. These three aspects become the source of inspiration and all graces for Christian families navigating the challenges of life today.

Like a ship hit by a storm at sea, the world today is shaken by a storm of moral value decline due to the ongoing pandemic. It is very clear that this danger also threatens families, including Catholic families. Realizing the importance of these three aspects for Christian families today, in this review, the author outlines what prayer, the Word, and the Eucharist are, and how crucial their roles are for Christian families in their lives amid the global pandemic.

Prayer is the first expression of human inner truth, the first condition for true freedom of the spirit (*Familiaris Consortio*). By praying, each individual expresses “the contents of their heart deeply, without hiding them from God, freely ‘exposing their heart’ before God” because prayer is an expression or manifestation of human faith in God. Thus, we can conclude that prayer is an essential part of every human being's life, inseparable from human existence.

In the context of Christian life, Jesus Christ the teacher has set an example of the importance of prayer. Early in the morning, while it was still dark, He got up and went out to a solitary place and prayed there (cf. Mark 1:35). Praying together in the family brings God into the midst of the family and actualizes the mystery of God's saving work in the world. Recognizing the importance of prayer life in the family, it is necessary to understand the call of Pope John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio*: prayer is the strongest stimulus for families to fully embrace all their responsibilities as the first and fundamental cell of human society. Christian families are called to sanctify first themselves and then the world. Christian families carry the noble task of presenting the mystery of God's saving work in the family and the world.

What about the role of prayer in the lives of Christian families during the COVID-19 pandemic? In an interview with Mr. Kanis K, 61 years old, a retired civil servant residing in Galang Station, he shared his prayer life experience during self-isolation in a regional hospital when tested positive for Covid-19. "Prayer is the only place to express my inner situation. I felt that living in self-isolation at the hospital brought about various other ailments. Living alone, feeling abandoned by society, but I am grateful that my wife, children, and extended family communicated with me at all times. Communication technology played a crucial role as a means of providing support in the form of prayer, attention, and love. I am thankful for the care and love from my family."

From Mr. Kanis K's experience, the family is an irreplaceable source of love. The unity within the family provides strength. The power of prayer in the family, with all forms of attention, becomes a model for facing or combating new religious movements, which are spirituality without God. The power of prayer is fundamental in human life, with mutual prayer. Children pray for their parents in their activities, and vice versa, parents pray for their children in all their life events, especially with the Church and government officials' exhortations to adhere to health protocols.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Mr. Paul M, a 50-year-old civil servant, shared his prayer life experience when his wife and two children tested positive for the Covid-19 virus. He said: "When my wife and children were declared Covid-19 positive, I spontaneously said, 'God, what do you want from our lives?' I wondered if Covid-19 could really kill humans, including my wife. God, I believe that You give the best. My children, extended family, and I

always gave support and prayed for a speedy recovery. The experience of my wife's self-isolation made me strong enough to live without her physically beside me, but we remained united mentally."

The experiences of others dealing with Covid-19 naturally have different perspectives than those who go through it directly. Mr. Paul's experience also inspires Christian families to remain present with their family in both good and bad situations, such as sickness, and to rely on God in all circumstances. God is everything in human life, and continuous communication with Him through prayer is essential.

By obeying regulations and praying for each other, every family member has the opportunity to express their faith in God, even by praying together with other family members at home, helping each other to grow and appreciate all aspects of their lives. During this pandemic, the intensity of praying for one another has increased. For instance, husbands and wives deepen their appreciation of the sacraments they have received, especially the sacrament of marriage. They are also called to extend the abundant grace. Prayer also enables married couples to live out the unity of their love as a symbol of the unity between Christ and His Church. By gathering and praying together, parents directly pass on their faith to their children, helping them grow into mature individuals of faith who are not easily swayed by the various temptations of the times. Moreover, their children will also grow into reflective individuals.

Prayer is a fundamental part of Christian life, the "deepest expression of human truth," showing that humans need God. Prayer is the strongest asset for families to fulfill their duties. Thus, the genuine involvement of a Christian family in the life and mission of the Church is directly proportional to the fidelity and intensity of prayer prayed by the family, through which the family is united with the True Vine, that is, the Lord Christ.

The role of prayer in the family is to bring God into the midst of the family, to bring the mystery of God's work of salvation into the midst of society. Educating their sons and daughters to become reflective, resilient, and characterful individuals. By praying together and praying for each other, Christian families make this world a more comfortable place to live and filled with peace.

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In prayer, families unite in joy and sorrow, hope and disappointment, births, birthdays, wedding anniversaries, farewells, reunions, school exams, and so on. These various occasions are moments to express gratitude, to ask and to surrender all family members to God. Parents play a very important role in teaching children to pray. One of the most important elements in family life is the Word. The Word referred to here is undoubtedly the Word of God itself.

From the Gospel passages, it can be seen that the status as disciples of Christ and the importance of the Word itself for every Christian are emphasized. If someone claims to be a

disciple of Christ, they certainly live by breathing the Word of God itself. Because if someone lives in His word, He will live among people so that whatever is asked, will surely be received.

The Word of God becomes the driving force for Christian families to navigate the oceans of life. For the Word of God is like a lamp that illuminates every step and struggle of Christian families. If Christian families live based on and breathe the Word of God, then all the events of their lives will be seen in the light of the Word of God. Your word, O Lord, is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

The Word of God that we hear, read, and contemplate in our daily family life will always encourage us to direct our hearts to all the works of salvation done by God in this world. By living according to this Word of God, this Word of God is able to transform our lives for the better. This Word of God will move every member of the family to cultivate themselves into better individuals. This Word of God is capable of changing the life of every individual (Thompson, 1999).

The Word of God is a guide for every individual in Christian families to build their marital life, to educate their children, and to respond to their life situations. What does it mean? The Word of God heard or read, from there Christian families can contemplate to what extent they live out the sacraments they have received. Through it, they can find inspiration in navigating the life journey of their family. Christian families can also educate their children based on the Word of God. Therefore, it can be said that the Word of God is the driving force for the lives of Christian families. The Word of God becomes the light and lamp for the journey through the ocean of life.

Experience of a housewife Gertrude S, aged 42, who works as a farmer. She shared her family life experience, especially regarding the word of God. During this pandemic, my husband, children, and I felt that God was distant. Distant because we no longer went to the chapel, the parish church, to hear the word. We adhered to the protocol not to attend Sunday services or face-to-face Mass celebrations to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus. My question: is God also infected by the virus so that His word is no longer heard? Church officials advised attending online masses to listen to His word. How can we attend online masses when we don't have an android phone? We live in a pandemic where God may also be affected by Covid.

Gertrude's experience shows that the word of God during the pandemic is lost due to the limitations of resources and infrastructure, or in other words, the economic crisis. Even with an unsupportive economic situation, Christian families should realize the importance of the Word of God for their daily lives so that they remain in His Word in order to bear abundant fruit in their daily lives, to season the world with their good deeds, driven and moved by the Word of God itself.

The Eucharist is the pinnacle of our faith celebration because in it, we meet God personally. In the Eucharist, the hidden God is present and greets His people personally. The family is a small community that exists and is present in the midst of society. Likewise, the family is a small Church or "domestic church." The Church gives birth to Christian families,

channeling to them the saving grace of God through its sacraments. The Church encourages and guides families to live out their calling to love, so they may emulate the sacrificial love of Christ given to humanity. Because the family is part of the Church, the family also participates in the Church's mission to convey the love of Christ to humanity.

This family is called to holiness. This means the family is called to sanctify itself first, its members, and then others. Therefore, the role of the family in sanctifying each other has its roots in Baptism and reaches its peak in the celebration of the Eucharist. Why? Because the celebration of the Eucharist re-presents the covenant between Christ and His Church, sealed with His blood. In this sacrifice of Christ, the spouses receive the grace from its source, from where their marital covenant originates, is established, and continuously renewed. The Eucharist bestows upon the family the gift of love, which becomes the foundation and soul of their family communion and mission. In addition to the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Reconciliation also plays an important role in the sanctification of the family.

In the celebration of the Eucharist, it is the pinnacle of the Catholic faith celebration; therefore, all of us and all Catholic families should be able to draw strength from Jesus Christ, who is present in the form of bread and wine. Therefore, prayer should be a longing in every family and every individual. Saint Augustine saw "Your longing is your prayer" (Van Bavel, 2011). Longing is the expression of the deepest heart because "Longing is nothing more than desiring things that are not there."

CONCLUSION

In the past decade, changes in experiencing the faith of Catholic families in the midst of life during this pandemic as Catholics have begun to fade. This also affects everyone's perspective on evangelism from within the Church itself. The issues experienced by Christian families in the new religion, especially during the pandemic, prayer, the word of God, and the Eucharist become the foundation of spiritual life. Prayer, the Word, and the Eucharist are three very basic things needed by Christian families in general and Catholic families in particular.

Catholic families formed through monogamous, indissoluble, and sacramental marriage cannot be separated from the role of prayer, the word, and the Eucharist. Families with prayer, the word, and the Eucharist are like a house and its inseparable roof. Catholic families and all of us should live in prayer. Through prayer, we are all increasingly invited to understand the word of God proclaimed in the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, we all may unite and dwell in the Lord. Through prayer, the word, and the Eucharist, the grace of God continually flows to us all, namely, tangibly in the celebration of the Eucharist.

Thus, we see how important the role of prayer, the word, and the Eucharist are for Christian families in general and Catholic families in particular. Mother Teresa of Calcutta said that "Families that pray together will stay together." Therefore, as much as possible, families who pray, read, and meditate on the Word of God, and celebrate the Eucharist will stay together.

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