

NURSES' VOICE FROM THE FIELD

Supererogation or exploitation? Reassessing the plight of COVID-19 volunteers

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The role played by health care workers in the COVID-19 crisis is undeniably one that will leave an imprint on future historical accounts of the pandemic. Countries around the world called for volunteers to improve their responses as the number of cases increased. Unfortunately, it was reported that over 600 nurses have died from COVID-19 around the world (ICN, 2020). Focusing on the concept of volunteerism, this paper raises the question of whether such an act is a form of supererogation or a new face of exploitation.

Raimond Gaita (2004, p.xvi-xvii) defines a supererogatory act as "an act that is beyond the call of duty." While other normative theories in ethics may focus on intention and consequences as rubrics for the moral valuation of an act, a supererogatory act emphasizes the spirit in which an action is done (Gaita, 2004, p.xvii). In medical literature, such act has been described in the effort of Dr. J.A. Macdonald who carried the coffin of a man who died of smallpox, after other people refused to go close to his remains ("A work of supererogation," 1908, p.1291).

One interesting historical depiction of supererogation or sainthood, involving a 'nurse', can be derived from the life of Saint Agatha who is regarded as "the patron saint of the breast, [and] wet nurses" (Lewison, n.d., p.159). The story of Saint Agatha takes place on the island of Sicily where she was "preordained as a child of benediction" (Lewison, n.d., p.156). The beauty of Saint Agatha soon captivated the Governor of Sicily, Quintianus, who wasted no time to advance his libidinous desires (Lewison, n.d.). Saint Agatha's rejection of Quintianus soon resulted in her imprisonment in a brothel, named, the house of Aphrodesia (Lewison, n.d.). Saint Agatha's faith in God remained unshaken, thereby further angering Quintianus (Lewison, n.d.). It is said that because of this, Quintianus decreed the removal of Saint Agatha's breasts with iron shears (Lewison, n.d.). Saint Peter and an angel, however, visited Saint Agatha and healed her wounds (Lewison, n.d.).

Quintianus, upon learning of the miracle of Saint Peter, was filled with rage and furiously directed that Saint

Agatha be burned alive. But no sooner was she placed upon a blazing pyre then a violent earthquake shook the city of Catania. Believing that this scourge was inflicted upon their city because of the martyrdom of Saint Agatha, the people of Catania demanded that she be immediately released. Her torments at an end, she was placed in prison where she prayed to be allowed to die. The Lord then took her to Himself (Lewinson, n.d., p.157).

Health care volunteerism can be considered as a form of a supererogatory or saintly act in the time of COVID-19 for the reason that health care workers (HCWs) run the risk of getting infected from a virus of which the scientific community has limited knowledge. Unlike other infectious diseases that have available pharmacologic interventions, COVID-19 prompted a global race towards the discovery of its potent vaccine.

Positive as it may seem, volunteerism must not only be seen as a saintly or heroic act. Instead, the dimension of exploitation must likewise be examined. It must be recalled that health worker migration has resulted in a shortage and maldistribution of HCWs particularly in Southeast Asia (Kanchanachitra et al., 2011). In this regard, it could have been logical for governments to improve the working conditions of HCWs in their countries of origin. However, minimal structural reforms took place thereby making the idea of migrating to wealthier countries a more inviting prospect among nurses in particular.

In the COVID-19 crisis, countries were taken by surprise on how to augment their health workforce capacities. The idea of calling for volunteers could have been morally acceptable. However, what came as a trade-off of this heroic act is more of a form of exploitation. Despite rendering essential services during the pandemic, it is saddening to note that many workers, inclusive of HCWs and other front liners, have lost their hazard pays even if the number of new infections has continued to increase (Melin & Steverman, 2020; Kabiling,

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2020). In addition, even HCWs endured the lack of sufficient COVID-19 testing kits and personal protective equipment (PPE) while rendering services firsthand (“Healthcare workers and coronavirus,” 2020).

In a recent *Lancet* commentary, it was mentioned that “policymakers working on the COVID-19 response should ensure citizens understand that their voices are being heard” (Marston, Renedo, & Miles, 2020, p.1677). This includes the voices of HCWs and other front liners. Like Saint Agatha, the nurses of today continue to face injustices on numerous levels. While volunteerism can be equated to altruism, we must not forget the fact that the lives of saints and heroes are also materially embodied; situated in time and space, and that they also suffer from injustice. Cox (2020, p.510), furthermore, advises us “that rather than invoking the language of heroism to praise healthcare workers, we should examine, as a society, what duties healthcare workers have to work in this pandemic, and how we can support them in fulfilling these.”

In concluding the story of Saint Agatha, Lewison (n.d., p.158) narrated that:

One year after the death of Saint Agatha, the city of Catania was threatened by a violent volcanic eruption from nearby Mt. Etna. The devout and faithful Christians fled to Saint Agatha's tomb for refuge. Therefrom among her sacred relics, they took her veil, placed it on a lance, and marched to meet the molten lava. The glowing mass was nearing the city when suddenly confronted with the sacred relic, the lava swerved to one side and spared Catania.

The taking of Saint Agatha's veil in the story can be interpreted as the public's trust in what she embodies. Ironically, however, even the cry of health workers for a timeout in the midst of increasing COVID-19 cases appear to be insignificant among those who wield great political power in society.

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