

Scars of Isolation:

The Effects of Covid on the Catholic Tokyo Archdiocese

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隔離傷：

カトリック東京教区に残したコロナの影響

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新型コロナウイルス感染症とその余波は、日本の宗教施設に深い傷跡を残した。移民が宗教コミュニティを社交の場として利用していることを考慮すると、2020年から2023年にかけて宗教集会が一時停止または縮小された後、信者は独特の影響を受けた。本稿では、観察を通じて、新型コロナウイルスの規制がカトリック東京大司教区に与えた影響を特に考察する。そして4つの教会でインタビューしました。

この共著記事は7つのセクションに分かれています。最初の節では、日本の宗教コミュニティに対する新型コロナウイルス感染症政策の広範な重要性について概説します。これは人生の価値への貢献が身体的に健康であることに限定されないことについて述べています。第2節は、本研究の方法論を紹介します。第3節では、東京カトリック大司教区のコロナ感染対策のタイムラインなどを示します。第4節では、本論文で取り上げられる4つの小教区の歴史を紹介した後、第5節に3人の信徒の証言を紹介します。第6節と第7節では、各教会政策の相違点を分析します。最後に、カトリック東京大司教区の英語ホームページから引用したコロナ対策報告の要約である。

An April 2023 CNN article predicting the decline of Christianity in America cited immigration as a potential solution to stop its plummeting decline. Christianity has seen a reduction in Americans identifying as Christian from 90% in 1970 to 64% today. The article claims it might reverse this trend if it can keep migrants in the pews. Its author, John Blake, did not cite any concrete ideas (Blake 2023).

Halfway around the world, the Catholic Church in Japan has been struggling to capture the attention of its migrant population, which now consists of nearly half its membership (Takahashi, 2022). The way this minority religion has made church popular to foreigners has been by giving them space to practice their culture and interact with aging Japanese Catholics. However, these efforts have been threatened since 2020 due to the Covid pandemic, which exacerbated isolation and challenged the strength of church social ties.¹ During this time, churches were forced to suspend Mass, cancel social activities, and advise elderly and immune-compromised believers from coming to church. Such actions isolated elderly and foreign parishioners from social networks when they needed it the most.

Conner (2014) remarks that foreigners search for religious communities to help them adjust to a new environment. This trend is especially the case for Filipino Catholics, for which many find themselves drawn to the Roman Catholic Church in Japan (RCCJ hereafter). The Archdiocese needed to provide concrete solutions to these Filipinos' loneliness under Covid. Instead, Filipinos were told to

¹ "Covid" refers to the 2019 global pandemic, otherwise described as COVID-19 in the appendix.

stay home and use the internet to solve their problems. When Masses resumed, the healthy, low-risk, and Japanese-speaking were prioritized, leaving comparatively large swaths of Catholics unable to attend. At the end of 2023, Catholic parishes nationwide have not returned to pre-Covid attendance levels. Some places still encourage mask-wearing and discuss precautions to reduce the spread of new Covid variants. Even the government began administering the sixth batch of vaccines at the end of 2023 for no other reason but to warn citizens to stay vigilant.

All of the precautions by the Japanese government, the RCCJ, and the Catholic Tokyo Archdiocese (abbreviated as Archdiocese hereafter) serve as a reminder of the minority position of Catholics in this country and the pressure for their compliance regardless of the cost. The Archdiocese had to assure Japanese society that its Masses would not become super-spreader events, but it did so by canceling Mass and sacraments—unprecedented measures otherwise unheard of. Unlike the United States, Christians in Japan are a miniscule 1% to 2% of the population, leaving the Archdiocese in no position to take a counter-cultural stance by ignoring national directives. With little room to compromise, elderly and foreign Catholics were greatly affected, so a total recovery in all forms has yet to come.

1. The RCCJ, Covid, and the Impact on Believers' Well-being

Japanese residents' lives were turned upside-down in March 2020 when the government requested that no one go outdoors unless it was essential. This announcement prevented many foreigners from attending work, which made their already precarious lives more so

(Fujinami 2020, 22; Inaba 2021; Iwamoto 2022, 10; Nonaka 2021, 32). A month later, the government closed all public and private schools, causing extra burden on language-handicapped parents (Kojima 2020, 16; Sawaki 2022, 28). Finally, those hospitalized became isolated as they could not receive visits from friends and families (Iwamoto 2022). Covid affected the entire population of Japan, but foreigners especially felt its impact due to their minority position in Japanese society.

Well-being is more than merely not being sick; it is a compilation of many factors, including physical and psychological health. Studies show that civil societies (such as religious communities) support members' well-being by increasing their sense of interdependence toward each other (Steinhoff 2017), thus playing a positive role in society. Because communities depend on members' interactions to improve well-being, Covid policies of social distance disrupted these interactions and, in doing so, their psychological health. Examples of this can be found throughout Japan. A mosque in Nagoya, for example, closed its doors for six months and later instituted strict protocols such as sanitizing hands, lottery participation, and social distancing (Qureshi 2020, 31). A mosque in Osaka was forced to close at night during Ramadan—typically an essential period for communal sharing (Katsura 2021, 32). Vietnamese Buddhist temples were forced to cancel food distribution programs (Baffelli and Takahashi 2022; Takahashi 2022), and Kachin (Myanmarese) and Vietnamese Christians were forced to hold meetings online (Tran et al. 2021; Watanabe 2022). These examples show how the Covid pandemic had

broad implications, negatively affecting foreign religious communities.

2. Method

This study is a collaborative work between LeMay, a sociologist studying multiculturalism in the RCCJ, and Martinez, a Dominican priest serving the Tokyo Archdiocese. Martinez offers his reflections on serving three parishes during Covid. His research on the history of these parishes, highlighted by personal experience, provides a vital background to analyze the effects of Covid on individual believers' lives. LeMay supports these observations with those made at Umeda Church, for which he spent the last fifteen years observing and serving as a member. This paper is based on their conversations about the Archdiocese between 2022 and 2023 before and during the Covid pandemic. LeMay and Martinez met five times on the first Sunday of the month at Tachikawa Catholic Church² on Tokyo's western side. Each meeting included lunch and casual conversation, walking to or from the closest train station. Martinez produced a manuscript comparing three parishes he had close contact with from 2000 to 2022. Afterward, two written statements of foreign parishioners from two communities where Martinez serves were added. Later, LeMay had an hour-long online interview with an attendee from Meguro Church about his experience during Covid.

Of the three informants in this study, all were in their late 40s or 50s, Filipino, and had lived in Japan for decades. Martinez has lived in

² Tachikawa Catholic Church is not included in this study.

Japan for over thirty years, living and serving in Tokyo and Chiba for the latter two decades. LeMay has lived in Japan for over twenty years, for which thirteen of these he has been a parishioner at Umeda Church. Martinez provided written statements about the churches he is now pastoring, which LeMay transliterated and adapted to construct a standard narrative.

Objective information taken from the Archdiocese English website was included in the appendix. This summary captures the order and progression of Covid protocols as levels of action vacillated between levels 3 and 4 between 2021 and 2022. Now that the current status of level 2 was reached on 6 June 2022,³ the diocese has left wearing masks up to the individual discretion of attendees, and most protocols have been relaxed.

Finally, pseudonyms of each informant have been provided to protect the identity of the parishioner. Using pseudonyms is an influential method authors use to conduct qualitative research to protect informants and researchers who interview them. In the insular community of the Roman Catholic Church in Japan, efforts must be made to protect the reputation of priests and parishioners alike. On the other hand, to appeal to a broader audience who may be uninformed of church matters within the RCCJ, proper church names have been divulged in hopes of corroborating the study's findings.

³ The latest Corona protocol can be accessed at: <https://tokyo.catholic.jp/info/disaster/40770/>.

3. Overview of Covid and its Impact on the Tokyo Catholic Archdiocese

When discussing multiculturalism within the Roman Catholic Church in Japan (RCCJ hereafter), Filipinos, Latinos, and Vietnamese receive the most attention. Fundamental research in this area is Mullins (2011), who discusses multicultural issues between Filipinos and Japanese parishioners. Hoshino (2014) and Milani (2014) write about Latin American *Nikkeijin* from the 1990s to the present. Takahashi (2018) discusses trends of Vietnamese Catholics from immigration as refugees after the Vietnam War and as special technical trainees in the twenty-first century.

The Archdiocese of Tokyo has been selected for its heavy foreign population and its efforts to accept foreign Catholics as equals. Tokyo is the most populated district in Japan. According to 2021 statistics, slightly more than 14 million people lived there in 2021. Of these, 96,532 Catholics were registered in its 76 parishes (CBCJ 2021). The Tokyo Archdiocese was founded in 1891 and, since the late twentieth century, has represented the greatest diversity of foreign-born to Japanese parishioners in the RCCJ.

Three years have passed since public Masses were first suspended in March 2020. Japan was late amongst other developed countries to receive vaccines. For that reason, the Archdiocese took extreme measures for its parishioners to “not be infected, nor (...) allow others to be infected” (Appendix G). At the time, most Japanese were deathly afraid of contracting the disease and faithfully followed the guidelines issued by the government and the Archdiocese. However, as this period of isolation dragged on, it began to take a personal toll

on many foreigners and elderly Catholics alike.

Prevention data reveals that by January 2022, nearly 75% of the population had received their second Covid vaccination shot. A year later, 77% of Japanese residents reported receiving their first or second vaccination by 22 April 2023 (VRS 2023). The more people are vaccinated, the more the initial fear around the disease dissipates. Tokyo experienced its seventh wave in late 2022. With the weekly average of infections hovering around 6,000 as of 3 April 2023, it is much lower than when weekly cases skyrocketed to over a million in the summer of 2022 and the 2023 new year (WHO 2023). With hospitalization rates down, everyone seems sure they will be infected at least once. Many have been infected twice or more. Despite the general sentiment that Japan must learn to live with this disease, it should not be forgotten that the effects of this pandemic can still be felt today, such as in the Archdiocese.

From the first appearance of Covid on the docks of Yokohama in February 2020, the Archdiocese has cooperated with the Japanese government's steps to prevent its spread, citing the heavy rate of foreign traffic compounded by its high median age. The actions taken by the Archdiocese are similar to other religious and public institutions internationally and domestically. However, the protracted length of its administration made the Tokyo Archdiocese's actions seem severe by comparison.

This severity became tangible during the Holy Week of 2020 when all parishes in the Archdiocese were forced to cancel church activities (Appendix A). Implementing Covid protocol meant an end

to public celebrations of Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, and the Easter Vigil—the most important celebrations in the Christian calendar.

<i>Beginning Date</i>	<i>Ending Date</i>	<i>Results</i>	<i>Stage</i>
<i>3/15/2020</i>	6/20/2020	Public Masses suspended	4
<i>6/20/2020</i>	8/15/2021	Limited Masses with conditions	3
<i>8/16/2021</i>	9/31/2021	Public Masses Suspended	4
<i>10/1/2021</i>	6/24/2021	Limited Masses with conditions	3
<i>6/25/2021</i>	Present (4/1/2022)	Masses with conditions	2

Figure 1: Summary of Public Mass Suspension 2020-2022

Stage	Conditions⁴	Notes
4	No public Mass. All sacraments are suspended, except for the anointing of the sick, meetings to be held online, Mass of the archbishop to be live-streamed by volunteers	Priests to hold private Mass in residence
3	Masses to be held with conditions, no vocal responses by congregation, no singing by congregation, social distancing enforced, no conversation during or after Mass, Mass time shortened by omitting songs/verses, no procession at beginning or end of Mass, no procession of gifts, no handshaking or physical contact, no receiving communion on the tongue, no holy water at the front of the chapel, no donations to be solicited during Mass, Masses to be limited to registered parishioners after taking temperature	Choir limited to singing by cantor, feet-washing during Holy Week canceled. Attendance regulated
2	Masks and hand sanitation required, singing by congregation allowed with conditions, size of congregations limited, social distancing to be observed, no holy water at the front of chapel, no donations to be solicited during the Mass	Activities with food allowed with conditions
1	Mass to resume without conditions	

Figure 2: Four Stages of Corona Prevention

⁴ Refer to the appendix for detailed information.

These closures were only slightly lifted by Christmas 2020 as strict guidelines (level 3) were enforced to limit attendance. These measures were relaxed by March 2022, but guidelines to limit the length and number of participants at public gatherings continued until the end of that year. Even as of April 2023, many parishes continued to regulate Mass attendance and social activities, and mask-wearing was still practiced.

Despite speaking out against the unfair treatment of foreigners or the elderly on many social issues, the Tokyo Archdiocese largely complied with government requests.⁵ As illustrated below, the extent of how each parish dealt with the Tokyo Archdiocese's four stages for the 'protection of all human life' varied across geography and age groups. Some parishes sought to ease the effects of Covid by offering more Masses. Other priests did home visits to the elderly. The following ethnographic accounts from parishes exemplify the vast diversity of each parish when deciding what to do with protocols shaped at the national level.

4. A Case Study of Four Parishes in the Tokyo Archdiocese

Martinez moderates the pastoral participation of different communities in the languages of Japanese, English, and Spanish at several parishes in the Archdiocese. From March 2020 to September 2022, he spent two years pastoring religious communities, experiencing how each parishioner dealt with this long, sad, and unique time differently.

With the landing of Covid in Japan, specifically in Tokyo, the

⁵ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/02/26/national/children-vaccinations-begin/>.

situation on a personal and collective level, be it in a company, family, or some other group, drastically impacted political, social, economic, and religious life. Since the spread of the Covid virus in 2020, the Archdiocese has taken necessary measures to protect all the people related to the different communities in the Archdiocese, such as suspending public Mass alongside those in Italy and the Vatican. For three years, it became unclear when infections would peak in Japan, leading the Archdiocese to raise and lower its prevention between stages two and four several times.⁶

The parishes Martinez discussed in this study are listed below for easy comprehension. The locations of the parish communities where Martinez was involved stretch across the Archdiocese and are characteristically different. Shibuya Church is located in what is generally known as the nerve center of Tokyo. By comparison, Koiwa Church borders what can be said to be the outskirts of the macro city of Tokyo, and Narashino Church is in another province called Chiba Prefecture outside the perimeters of Tokyo. Umeda Church (for which LeMay discusses) is on the northern side of Tokyo, and Meguro Church (from where the informant Mr. Gonzalez attends) is in the heart of the metropolis, not far from Shibuya Church. The reader should be aware that the number of members listed in this chart is taken from church websites and are consistently larger than the actual number of weekly participants.

⁶ Refer to the appendixes below for more detailed information.

Name	Location	Parishioner number	Mass Language
Shibuya	Shibuya	1024	Japanese
Koiwa	Chiba	700	Japanese/English/Tagalog
Narashino	Narita	650	Japanese/English/Spanish
Umeda	Adachi ward	287	Japanese/English
Meguro	Meguro ward	1336	Japanese/English

Figure 3: Details of 5 Churches

4.1. Shibuya Church

Shibuya Church is located adjacent to Shibuya ward, one of the leading centers in Tokyo, where young people congregate and enjoy themselves. Even though it is close to the perimeter of this metropolis, the nearest train station is a twenty-minute walk from the chapel. This is not to say that these youth directly influence the parish community, as many who attend could not be called youth in the strictest sense. When Shibuya Church was originally built in 1960, it was located on the outskirts of the then-poor district of Shibuya. Still, over the years, the influx of young people from rural areas from the rest of Japan has caused the perimeter of the capital's metropolitan area to increase and expand. Today, Shibuya and its surroundings have become the heart of Tokyo, making the neighborhood around Shibuya Church predominately an affluent residential area.

As paradigmatic as it may seem, since the beginning of the parish, a majority of its members have not lived directly in the Shibuya district but commute from elsewhere outside the metropolis. According to observations, at least three generations have grown up and identified as parish community members. The comparatively large

community itself is almost entirely Japanese, and all activities and Masses held are in the Japanese language.

Next door to the parish is the residence of the priests' community, a Dominican priory. This has served for almost the entire history of the parish, which is not more than 60 years old, and has meant that in addition to the parish priest, the priests who live in the religious community have been a significant link in the running of its parish. It could even be said that thanks to this contact at a community and personal level, it has been a source of energy and solidarity for the everyday work and the development of both the parish community and those religious residing there.

According to its website (renewed in 2019), Shibuya Church has a membership of 1024 members, and until about ten years ago, it was expected that between 250-300 people would attend key Sunday Masses. This changed, however, with Covid and the protocols each parish was forced to implement. As with other parishes in the Archdiocese, public Masses at Shibuya Church were canceled from 15 March to 21 June 2020. Subsequently, after this ban was lifted, some Masses timidly resumed their activity. Strictly, only parishioners registered in the parish were later allowed to participate in the celebration of the Mass following the protocols established by the Archdiocese. While following these guidelines, it was a special requirement by the parish priest not to allow verbal responses during Mass. Procession of the gifts, singing, and other different participations were also prohibited.

Before 2020, Masses were celebrated on Sunday at 8:00 and 10:00

a.m., but post-2020, Masses were limited to only one Mass at 10:00 a.m. Only a tiny group of people belonging exclusively to the parish attended then. Just as Masses began, however, the Covid situation took an unexpected turn for the worst, and Sunday Masses were suspended again from 10 January to 31 October 2021. Again, from November 2021, Masses were re-established with a single 10:00 a.m. Sunday Mass. From 23 January to 27 March 2022, the Mass was suspended due to another rise in Covid infections. From 28 March 2022, the situation remained stable, and on 7 August 2022, the number of Masses increased (or returned) to the pre-Covid times of 8:00 and 10:00 am.

During this situation, the parishioners who attended followed the protocols implemented by Shibuya Church, which divided the parish into 'blocks,' allowing the parish to stagger parishioners' attendance at Mass. Only those who lived in blocks eligible for Mass attendance could pre-register online. Even after these measures were relaxed, participants were still required to wear masks and were forbidden from responding orally to prayers and ritual replies during the Mass. As of 19 March 2023, participants at the Eucharist wore masks and could not answer during the rites of the celebration. In a sense, the actions Shibuya Church's community took in response to Covid protocols were consistent with other churches in the Archdiocese.

4.2. Koiwa Church

The second church is in the Edogawa district, bordering the prefecture of Chiba. It has a different characteristic from Shibuya Church and lies

outside the financial hub of Tokyo (referred to as Yamanote). What was once an idyllic spot of Edo (old Tokyo) at the mouth of the Edo River that held the wetlands of Tokyo Bay has now become a vast, amalgamated expanse of small buildings leeched of the bucolic charm it once had. The church currently has a registered number of around 700 parishioners, and the comparatively smaller chapel has a capacity to seat about 100.

Due to the outbreak and the increased number of Covid infections, public Masses and activities around the Archdiocese were officially suspended twice, as stated above. Koiwa Church followed the same protocols as Shibuya Church and others during these closure periods. It should be noted, however, that up to this point, all attending its Sunday Mass had to pre-register their required information before being allowed to enter the chapel for worship. Nevertheless, there was no system of church 'blocks' as seen above with Shibuya Church.

After the closure period ended on 21 June 2020, Koiwa Church began following strict guidelines by security protocols. Some changes included splitting the community into two Masses to provide 'social distance' between parishioners. By way of compensation, Koiwa Church increased the number of Mass celebrations on Saturday and Sunday, giving foreign parishioners a greater opportunity to attend Mass in person (refer to Appendix C).

Koiwa Church offers Masses in three languages: Japanese, English, and Tagalog. Similar changes were made to these Masses as well. Although these changes were made to the number of Masses, some pastoral activities, such as administering public rituals of baptism and

confirmation, were postponed until further notice. Such suspensions reduced the attendance rate at Masses. This was especially the case with the Filipino parishioners, who would often invite friends and extended family to celebrate the sacraments of their children.

4.3. Narashino Church

The third parish, Narashino Church, is in the province of Chiba, under the Tokyo Archdiocese's authority. It lies close to the Tokyo-Narita International Airport and is a bed town for Narita. Narashino Church became a part of the Tokyo Archdiocese in 1986. At that time, the church community began in the Nakada district in Narita New Town, using an ordinary house as its chapel. With an eye toward the future, this community expanded this structure in 1988. Finally, it built a new chapel at a different location in 1995, where it currently rests. Many Filipinos and people from Latin America live around the city. Also, it is common for international visitors from adjacent Narita airport to attend, increasing its international atmosphere. Narashino Church currently has about 400 Japanese parishioners and 250 foreigners attending its Masses.

As with other parishes in the Archdiocese, Narashino Church followed the protocols issued by the bishop's office. Like other churches, Masses were conducted by considering the capacity of the chapel or meeting facility, so as not to exceed the established number of attendees. Similarly, the number of Masses offered on Saturday and Sunday were increased, meaning that Japanese Masses and Mass times in English and Spanish increased to ensure more participation.

Another characteristic worth noting has been an increase in online study of the Bible in Spanish and the training of children acolytes and those awaiting First Communion.⁷ These online innovations made Narashino Church special.

4.4. Umeda Church

The fourth parish is located on the northern side of Tokyo and joined the Archdiocese in 1987. According to observations, this parish is attended by roughly two hundred members at a weekly Japanese and English Mass (attendance that varies slightly from online records). Umeda Church is located on the northern side of the Arakawa River with cheaper rent and property costs making it popular with the Filipino community. Moreover, many attendees come from the adjacent Saitama Diocese to hear Mass in English due to its proximity to Saitama prefecture.

Umeda Church followed the protocols of the Archdiocese by suspending Mass and requiring strict compliance to pre-Mass registration and changes to the Mass to prevent community spread of Covid. Some specifics included registering at a parish database to check in before Mass via QR Code. In early 2021, shortly after the first suspension of Mass, parishioners were required to have two vaccinations before being allowed to enter the church. Non-vaccinated attendees had to receive a PCR test within three days of the Mass attendance. This policy was strictly enforced, and there were cases of

⁷ Like First Communion, sacraments were resumed in June 2021.

some members being denied entry. PCR tests were also enforced, as was evident when the church board held an Easter gathering in 2021, and several attendees were forced to pay nearly the equivalent of US\$90 for a PCR test to attend.⁸

The strict registration policy effectively barred young children from attendance, as vaccinations were not standard or legal until late 2021. As a result, its church school was forced to conduct its monthly classes online, thus suspending all social activities such as monthly gatherings, winter sleepovers, and summer camps. All sacraments were suspended likewise. In compliance with Archdiocesan directives, the parish priest discouraged even older members with vaccinations to refrain from attending, citing their health. Such a hardline stance immediately reduced youth and older members' attendance, thus halving the church's size.

From 2021 to 2022, a second wave hit Tokyo, forcing Umeda Church to cancel all social events and the English Mass. Filipino parishioners were allowed to attend Mass if they followed the strict protocols described above. Ultimately, the English Mass was canceled due to difficulty administering these protocols and reduced Mass attendance. What was left was the Sunday morning Mass (said in Japanese) attended by less than fifty people. At this solitary Sunday Mass, the singing of hymns was suspended, and all oratory responses were limited to the lector standing at the front of the chapel. Processions to the front of the church conducted at the beginning and

⁸ At this time, cheaper antigen tests were not available.

end of Mass were suspended. When Catholics approached the altar to receive communion from the priest, they were required to sanitize their hands and not talk. Finally, mask-wearing was strictly enforced at all times.

As of 26 June 2022, the level of Covid precaution was lowered to level 2 (Appendix H). Accordingly, Umeda Church followed by slowly resuming liturgical practices like vocal responses of the congregation, singing in the choir, and processing to the altar. Even social events continued and some meals were served. Nevertheless, this application was not universal, as the English-speaking community was more progressive in resuming former activities than the Japanese.

5. Personal Statements from the Wider Community

Perception has everything to do with location, and from where parish priests stand at the front of the chapel, they may not always see the effects policies have on the lives of parishioners. For this reason, the following spotlights three communities at which Martinez offers Mass by introducing statements from parishioners in these congregations. In the absence of a personal statement from Shibuya Church, the statement of a parishioner from Meguro Church has been added. The first two statements came from written testimony, whereas the third is from an online interview.

5.1. Increased Workload: The Story of a Filipino from Koiwa Church

A prescient problem with Archdiocese Covid protocols has been an increased workload, thus burdening parishioners. The first account

comes from a Filipino leader in the parish council. Mr. Sanchez (pseudonym) expressed concern about the parish's decision to "formulate policies and countermeasures on how to prevent the spread of virus infection," such as "assign[ing] more people to do tasks" usually not done "before the pandemic." These included "taking registration, sanitizing the hands, and taking the body temperature of every person inside the church." Some of these actions included passing out alcohol wipes to attendees after each Mass to wipe the area around where people had been sitting. Other efforts included

- spraying one's hands with disinfectant before receiving communion,
- taping off areas between seats to ensure improved ventilation,
- opening windows and
- regulating the flow of attendees during Mass to limit face-to-face contact with potential risk of infection.

All these precautions were increased because Koiwa Church had to limit attendance at each Mass. As a result, the priest doubled Masses from one Tagalog and English Mass every second and fourth Sunday to two. "Doing [such measures] for a short period is manageable, but unexpectedly, the pandemic stayed with us for quite some time," Mr. Sanchez stated. After several months of collecting data, Koiwa Church leadership realized that the number of attendees at each Mass had decreased, meaning that foreign-language Masses could resume the previous schedule once every second and fourth Sunday. Mr. Sanchez mentioned how such precautionary measures "resulted in complaints," which might have been linked to reduced church attendance. Resuming the previous schedule of one weekend

Mass twice a month was more manageable, but a loss in overall membership caused it.

5.2. Death during Covid: The Story of a Filipino from Narashino Church

A Filipina called Ms. Flores comes from Narashino Church. She reflected on the pain of losing her father to Covid during the pandemic. According to Covid government protocols, as of April 2023, health institutions have not resumed regular visitation.⁹ At the height of Covid, extreme rules turned Ms. Flore's suffering into "chaos" as she felt her "world stop" when she could not pay respects to her father in his last days. Such horror made her feel as if "nothing mattered anymore." Ms. Flores reflected on this time how "hospitals were overloaded with Covid patients," and due to their shutting their doors, she "did not have a chance to see [her father] and say goodbye." The only contact she had with him came after his death when she "saw through video call how [his] dead body [was] wrapped in a blue sheet body bag." His body was "taken immediately to the (sic) cremation."

Ms. Flores commented how the government's extension of financial aid to all residents was "a great relief to all," helping ease the recession connected to people staying at home and not working. She recalled that during this time, "just to live without being affected by Covid was the outmost (utmost) aim" she had. Technology helped cope, such as communicating with family and friends in Japan and the

⁹ Pasley 2020 mentions that some exceptions have been made for the deathly ill. Martinez experienced with a recently hospitalized parishioner from Umeda Church the inability to visit due to Covid as late as 9 April 2023.

Philippines. “I attended online masses, [and] joined the GFGC Zoom rosary,” she wrote.¹⁰ She began to “pray the rosary every night,” thus helping to bring her “closer to God and Our Mother Mary.”

Not all was gloom, however, as Ms. Flores recalled how the Covid pandemic taught her “how to pray the rosary again.” Nevertheless, her experience was like many Catholics forced to be physically separated from older, sick family members and friends living in daycare facilities or admitted to hospitals. Not only could many Catholics not visit their elderly loved ones, but funerals during Covid were also postponed, and bodies of the deceased were cremated immediately following death, sometimes without any family members present.

5.3. Covid Nuisance: The Story of a Filipino Father from Meguro Church

In addition to statements from the above two informants, in February 2023, LeMay interviewed a Filipino father named Mr. Garcia, who had previously attended Meguro Church with his Filipino wife and two children. Unlike the above two Filipino Catholics, he was not active in this church. He frequently traveled around the Archdiocese between English Masses, attending whichever Mass time fit into his weekend schedule. In this regard, his experience is like that of many foreigners who have not become active in parish activities since the loosening of Covid protocols.

Mr. Garcia told me how the precautions of the prominent English

¹⁰ The GFGC (Gathering of Filipino Group Communities) is a lay-run group for Filipino Catholics started in the 2000s that connects Filipinos across the Tokyo archdiocese to perform events such as concerts, fellowship gatherings, and even community support such as volunteering and Filipino voter registration.

Mass he attended were cumbersome and inconvenient for him and his family. Before Covid, he could stay at church all day with his young children and mingle with compatriots over food and conversation. By doing this, his children made friends with other Catholic Filipinos organically. However, after Meguro Church implemented Covid protocols, anyone wishing to attend Sunday Mass had to preregister by Thursday in hopes they could be chosen to attend. If they were chosen and their plans changed, they would be admonished for carelessly wasting their chance to attend while others could not. "I could not be bothered with this," Mr. Garcia complained. As a result, his family stopped attending Meguro Church. He did not participate in church anywhere for nearly 18 months. Even as of February 2023, he had not resumed his pre-Covid activities.

Mr. Garcia was concerned that the inability to bring his children to church to make friends with other Filipinos would deleteriously affect their cultural identity. Due to his busy schedule, he could not find the time to comply with the strict protocols for church attendance, thus leading to his family's church absence. He mentioned that he had attended a Mass here or there but was less motivated to participate in church than before Covid. His young children also had become used to filling their Sunday time with things other than church.

6. Discussion and Analysis

There are differences between the above churches and their policies. In Shibuya Church, for example, the periods of absence from public Mass lasted longer than at Narashino and Koiwa Churches. Umeda

Church, which required vaccinations and PCR tests, delayed resuming Mass the longest. What influenced this difference? For starters, the size of foreign attendance mattered. Japanese Catholics tend to be older on average than their foreign counterparts and are less adept at using technology to interact with friends and family. Shibuya Church, for example, had no alternative to Mass once it was suspended. However, members in the other more multicultural parishes formed groups outside the parish using SNS to communicate.

Notably, none of the five churches introduced here or the many the authors observed refused to follow the Archdiocese's protocols. Nevertheless, each parish did not follow protocols uniformly, as there was considerable variation in each parish's implementation style. At Umeda Church, for example, the strict policy of mandating temperature checks meant those over 37.5 were refused Mass. Remarkably, the English leadership from the same community decided to suspend all English Masses because it felt such enforcement was impossible. Unlike Koiwa Church, Umeda Church felt its members should attend the sparsely-attended Japanese Mass instead of increasing the number of Masses. It believed that increasing the number of English Masses could not solve the initial enforcement problem.

Additionally, foreign Catholics began singing parts of the Mass earlier than the Japanese Mass at Umeda Church. Communal meals after the English Mass were also relaxed earlier. This difference in ethnic composition was also observed at Koiwa and Narashino, which shifted online its Bible class and the catechetical formation of children and adults. These churches used social networking systems such as

LINE and ZOOM to continue religious activities, thus making face-to-face meetings less urgent. Having the ability to meet friends online, like in the case of Mr. Garcia, has meant that some foreign Catholics who did not attend Mass weekly before Covid prolonged to return in person.

As noted, on 25 June 2022, precautionary measures were set for stage 2. However, parishes are still slow to recover because many parishioners filled their Sundays with other things after being told to stay away from church. It cannot be overstated the constant battle Catholics must play between the desire for Mass and the requirements heaped upon them by non-Catholic families and institutions that interfere with Sunday attendance. Covid weakened the walls that keep these outside pressures at bay, flooding the Catholics' lives with uncountable chores and activities that have come to interfere with Sunday worship. A prime example is Catholic children whose public school resumed sooner than churches resumed Mass. Church activities for children were forced to disband throughout the pandemic (although some continued online), causing many to lose years of progress as core participants stopped attending.

For nearly three years, the elderly were told to fear contracting Covid. Due to medical circumstances, many Catholics feared being unable to receive visits from relatives or sacraments during a potential hospitalization. Cell phones helped soothe some of the psychological pain of this separation, but many elderly Catholics were unable to understand new technologies, thus leaving them isolated during lockdown. Such a burden was felt especially at Shibuya Church, whose

Japanese parishioners and priests in the convent adjacent to the church were older by comparison.

Catholics living in healthcare residences or assisted living were denied visits by close relatives or spiritual assistance in times of sadness, loss, and grief. These faithful were hospitalized and died without being able to receive the sacrament of Extreme Unction, had their funerals prolonged, and their loved ones unable to see their body one last time before cremation. The trauma associated with such loss is hard to quantify.

Fear of contracting Covid also extended to one's family life. Because quarantine for a week or longer was mandated for anyone in close contact with someone with Covid, the entire family was forced to stay home if any household member was infected. Missing school and work due to sick family members became a constant headache. In worst cases, just as one family member recovered from Covid, the disease would spread to another, causing the quarantine timeline to start over. Fear of community spread kept many from attending Mass for years. The protocol on close contacts was lifted shortly after May 2023, thus removing one of the largest psychological burdens on working Catholics.

Though trivial by comparison is the constant issue of wearing masks. Being unable to see loved one's unmasked faces or being forced to place masks on uncooperative children was an extra burden for those wishing to attend Mass in person. Social distancing also made it impossible to embrace a loved one with hugs or kissing even when they were in psychological pain from the lack of contact Covid

measures produced. As Covid protocols were relaxed, it seems the youth are still not used to showing their faces or talking casually, as used to be the case after Sunday Mass. The constant need (or desire) to place a cloth over one's face or avoid physical contact has metastasized into a larger pain—finding oneself alone. Churches have tried to help with this loneliness but have few options when people stop attending Mass.

These three years have been a trying time for Catholics, whose religious leaders told them that their commitment to their religious community came second to their physical health. For those struggling to decide between their God and public health measures, it was what they needed to hear. In retrospect, however, our secular and religious institutions are much wiser in understanding that well-being cannot be limited to physical health. Over these years, a tradeoff jeopardized the mental health and social connections of Catholics who were cut from their church and its support network. There is no telling if church attendance will return to pre-Covid levels or even if such a return is something it should want. Such a question parishes will confront in their own way, taking cues from the bishop and Japanese government. Hopefully, what they learned about well-being from Covid this time can help them consider the broader impact of policies taken.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, every crisis presents an opportunity for positive learning. Not long ago, Pope Francis said while chatting with the media that “every crisis is a danger, but also an opportunity.” We hope this can

apply to these three years under Covid. Over this time, we have become familiar with new medical, social, environmental, and legal aspects of our lives that only now have moved into the foreground. Some of these include the implications of dealing with this novel virus by distancing from each other, confining when necessary, wearing masks, sanitizing our hands, and complying with governmental states of emergency and Archdiocesan precautionary measures and protocols. From an engineering perspective, many parishes have bought electric fans to increase ventilation or opened windows during Mass. On the family front, while social distancing has isolated many older people, the inability to leave one's house has ironically led to some families growing closer as they spent more time in each member's general vicinity. On the other hand, it also became evident that medical services could not alone solve the problems associated with containing this disease and that social institutions like churches are necessary to fight against the sense of abandonment and loneliness that the government and Archdiocesan Covid policies created.

From 2020 to 2023, the Archdiocese repeatedly requested older people comply with the government's request for social distancing by encouraging them to stay away from public gatherings such as those of the public Mass. It did this by pressing them to watch Mass online or find more time for silence and faithful prayer. During Covid, the Archdiocese tried to protect all lives by listening to health experts and government officials. This decision eased the anxiety of those who feared attending Mass and contracting the disease but did so at the expense of those who needed companionship.

Covid has taught the RCCJ that migrants, such as Filipinos, value the intimacy offered at church compared to the seclusion felt in Japanese society. Unfortunately for them, such physical touch has been missing over the past few years, so many found other communities where they could fill this need. As the Archdiocese returns to some semblance of normal by offering weekend Masses, this alone will be insufficient to attract foreign (and Japanese) Catholics. Instead, more creative ideas that value touch and personal face-to-face relationships must be considered to address the loneliness left by Covid and the policies enacted to prevent its spread. Our humble desire is that this small religious group can discover new methods of sharing and 'touching' their God through intimate encounters, thus helping it recover from its scars of isolation.

Appendixes

The following Appendixes were taken from the Tokyo Archdiocese homepage. They have been adapted, summarized, and divided by issue date for easy reference and comprehension. When needed, additional contextual information has been added. All references made to “COVID-19” correspond to the “Covid” described above.

Appendix A¹¹

Date of publication: 10 March 2020

Precautionary Measures Concerning COVID-19 from 15 March and Beyond

The spread of infections and serious cases due to COVID-19 have been reported one after another, and church activities such as public Masses have been suspended in different parts of the world. (...) [T]ake note of the following specific precautionary measures from 15 March and beyond as prescribed by the Archdiocese of Tokyo:

All parishioners of the Tokyo Archdiocese are dispensed from their obligation to attend Sunday Mass from 15 March (Sunday) to 29 March (Sunday) [2020].

1. All public Masses from 15 March (Sunday) will be suspended for now.

¹¹ <https://tokyo.catholic.jp/en/archbishop/message/37216/>

2. Concerning weddings and funerals, kindly take adequate precautions against infections before proceeding as usual.
3. For events other than Masses, as much as possible, kindly consider postponing or canceling them, except only for small gatherings.

Appendix B¹²

Date of publication: 7 April 2020

Advisory After the Japanese Government's Declaration of a State of Emergency

The Japanese government is to declare on 7 April a state of emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The declaration will apply to prefectures, including Tokyo and Chiba, for a period of one month. (...) [K]indly take note of the following changes in our precautionary measures:

1. On Other Activities Aside from the Mass

Except for urgent and important matters, regardless of the size, all other activities and meetings aside from the Mass must be canceled or postponed to a date after the emergency declaration is lifted.

2. On the Sacrament of Reconciliation

For those who would like to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation,

¹² <https://tokyo.catholic.jp/en/archbishop/message/38168/>

kindly consult a priest. However, please refrain from using the conventional box-type, private room-type “confessional”. Instead, kindly hold confessions in a reception room, with the priest and the penitent keeping a distance from each other, both wearing protective masks.

3. On Baptism and Confirmation

Except only for urgent cases, the celebration of baptisms scheduled for Easter will be postponed at a later date until the emergency is lifted.

4. On Funerals

As a consequence of the widespread infections, attendees put at risk not only the priest and those attending the ceremony but also the staff of the funeral services. It is recommended that the bereaved family (...) [consider] the possibility of proceeding with the cremation first and having the funeral at a later date.

Appendix C¹³

Date of publication: 6 October 2020 (published after distribution)

Toward Resuming Church Activities from 21 June 2020

After the declaration of state of emergency was lifted on 25 May 2020, public schools in Tokyo and Chiba reopened, and small gatherings were allowed to take place after taking precautionary measures against COVID-19 infections. (...) church activities will resume in stages

¹³ <https://tokyo.catholic.jp/en/archbishop/message/39041/>

from 21 June 2020. (...) We are currently in “Stage 4” and will shift to “Stage 3” starting 21 June 2020.

Stage 3: Public Mass and Activities with Conditions

Holy Mass: limit number of people, proper ventilation, hand disinfection, no singing, short homilies, no offertory procession (including the collection of monetary offerings), no physical contact during the greetings of peace, communion by hand, all wear face masks (parishioners, servers, priests), consider shortening the time for celebration (if possible, celebrate Mass more than once), non-participation of parishioners with chronic illness and the elderly depending on the situation, dispensation from obligation to attend Sunday Mass for all the faithful of Tokyo Archdiocese.

Reference 1: Reason why the elderly people are requested to pray at home

With the emergency declaration lifted, the Church is also preparing to bring back gradually the regular liturgical celebration of public Masses which have been suspended since Lent of 2020. On its initial stage, we are requesting that the so-called elderly people, as well as those with serious illness, refrain from participating in the Holy Mass.

Appendix D¹⁴

Date of publication: 13 July 2020

ON CHURCH ACTIVITIES WITH COVID-19

¹⁴ <https://tokyo.catholic.jp/en/archbishop/message/39432/>

For four consecutive days from 8 July – 12 July 2020, more than 200 cases of COVID-19 infections in Tokyo have been reported daily, and 119 cases today 13 July 2020 have been confirmed. At this point, there are no immediate plans to suspend church activities, inasmuch as the percentage of seriously ill patients remain low and there have been no reported fatalities due to COVID-19 since 24 June.

Appendix E¹⁵

Date of publication: 14 August 2021

SUSPENSION OF PUBLIC MASSES IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF TOKYO

(...) [D]ue to a resurgence of infections nationwide, public Eucharists have had to be suspended from 16 August until 1 October 2021. (...) Therefore, from 16 August 2021 (Monday), the Archdiocese of Tokyo will start the Stage 4 precautionary measures and suspend Masses in the parishes. Since the situation has been substantially changing, the period will be set to four (4) weeks from 16 August (Monday) to 12 September (Sunday), and the decision on whether to continue with this response will be announced on or before 5 September (Sunday). Regarding the Stage 4 precautionary measures considering the current situation, please take note of the attached reference.

¹⁵ <https://tokyo.catholic.jp/en/announcement/42685/>

Appendix F¹⁶

Date of publication: 24 September 2021

**ADVISORY AFTER THE LIFTING OF THE FOURTH DECLARATION
OF A STATE OF EMERGENCY**

As of this writing, the fourth declaration of a state of emergency is expected to be lifted by the end of September 2021. That being so, public Masses and church activities for the Archdiocese of Tokyo will thus resume starting 1 October 2021. (...) Concerning the vaccination program, the Holy Father made a powerful appeal for people to get vaccinated, saying it is “an act of love.” However, some people choose not to have themselves vaccinated due to various reasons, including physical conditions and allergies. For this reason, the Archdiocese has decided not to make vaccination mandatory.

Appendix G¹⁷

Date of publication: 25 October 2021

**RESTRICTIONS ON CHURCH ACTIVITIES DURING THE
CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR SEASON**

(...) We are aware that many people participate in the Christmas and New Year Masses every year, which is also an opportunity for evangelization. However, as it was last year, in keeping our commitment that “we will not be infected, nor will we allow others to be infected,”

¹⁶ <https://tokyo.catholic.jp/en/announcement/42872/>

¹⁷ <https://tokyo.catholic.jp/en/announcement/42872/>

and in order to avoid the Three C's (crowded places, close-contact settings, closed spaces) we cannot help but say that it will be difficult for many people to participate in the Holy Mass freely. Although it will depend on the size and the situation of the parish, we will continue to implement during the Christmas and New Year season the present Stage 3 precautionary measures against COVID-19 (as of October 1).

Appendix H¹⁸

Date of publication: 26 June 2022

FURTHER RELAXATION OF COVID-19 COUNTERMEASURES

In the Archdiocese of Tokyo, after 25 June, we will implement the Stage 2 precautionary measures. (...)

STAGE 2 PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES AS OF 25 JUNE 2022

Inside the church, (...) keep a certain distance from each other while providing adequate ventilation. (...) For the elderly and those with chronic illness (...), kindly pray at home. (...) Please refrain from singing together during the Holy Mass and in other gatherings. (...) In the meantime, there will be no offertory procession at the Holy Mass [and] please receive Holy Communion by hand; everyone must sanitize their hands immediately before reception. (...) [A]ll activities where people meet face-to-face, such as meetings (...), should be carried out in the parish if the number of people does not exceed the capacity of the

¹⁸ <https://tokyo.catholic.jp/en/announcement/44755/>

venue and adequate ventilation is carefully considered. (...) [P]lease refrain from events that involve eating and drinking.

Appendix I¹⁹

Date of publication: 24 February 2023

Re: Restrictions on Church Activities Due to COVID-19 Countermeasures from March 2023

Dear brothers and sisters in the Archdiocese of Tokyo:

The Archdiocese of Tokyo officially announced the countermeasures against COVID-19 on 30 January 2020. (...) In the Archdiocese of Tokyo, we have already practiced the optional wearing of face masks while outdoors. However, from the evening Mass celebrating the second Sunday of Lent on the eve of 5 March, the wearing of face masks inside the church and in church buildings will also be made optional.

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