

Office of the Provincial
PHILIPPINE PROVINCE
SOCIETY OF JESUS

De La Costa House
132 B. Gonzales St., Varsity Hills
Loyola Heights, 1108 Quezon City, PHL

Tel : (+63) (2) 8426-5275
Fax : (+63) (2) 8426-5278
Email : socius@phjesuits.org

P.O. Box 252, U.P. Post Office
1144 Quezon City, PHL

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Fourth Sunday of Easter: Good Shepherd Sunday

STATEMENT IN SUPPORT AND DEFENSE OF COMMUNITY PANTRIES

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Last week, the Maginhawa community pantry started making rounds on news and social media. It was a humble effort bridging those who needed food and those who had something to give. “*Magbigay ayon sa kakayahan, kumuha batay sa pangangailangan*” – this was the signage on the wooden rack of the first community pantry. Inspired by this idea of solidarity, several other individuals and groups all over the country started their own local community pantries. These initiatives have since become a source of hope for many, particularly for those who were left with meager to no aid during the extended COVID-19 lockdowns.

Unfortunately, some community pantries were disrupted when the police and the NTF-ELCAC began profiling and red-tagging organizers and volunteers. Without stating any clear and reasonable purpose, uniformed personnel asked for personal information from the organizers. These forms of “police profiling” are illegal and considered outright harassment, since personal information is protected by our Data Privacy Law. Due to this scare, several pantries were forced to close either temporarily or permanently. While Malacañang issued a statement directing law enforcement to “leave community pantries alone” except in matters of public health, it did little in stopping some officials, like Antonio Parlade and Lorraine Badoy, from maligning pantry organizers. Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque even implied that it is part of the protected speech of government officials, disregarding the fact that red-tagging by the government has already been linked to countless attacks on civilians and activists in the past several months.

The Philippine Province of the Society of Jesus believes that our citizens should be afforded their rights to organize activities that serve the common good, free from political harassment and regardless of their political beliefs and expressions. All forms of humanitarian aid including community pantries, even those organized by the critics of the government, should be welcome and supported, especially in this time when our collective effort is essential to get us through this pandemic.

Community pantries are expressions of solidarity motivated to mitigate the poverty and hunger exacerbated by a poor systemic response to the COVID pandemic. Pope Francis, in *Fratelli*

Tutti, reminds us that “[s]olidarity finds concrete expression in service, which can take a variety of forms in an effort to care for others. And service in great part means ‘caring for vulnerability, for the vulnerable members of our families, our society, our people.’”¹ In an address on April 11 this year, the Pope asserted that the sharing of goods is “not communism, but pure Christianity.” The pantries respond to the physical hunger of people and a simple desire to share goods but also are a powerful sign of hope awakening the spirit of kindness in all of us.

The community pantries serve as testimonies to the good that comes from empowering communities and promoting subsidiarity. Individuals and organizations came together to help alleviate the hunger faced by many of their neighbors. The pantries are a community effort aiming to solve, albeit temporarily, a community problem. PCP 2 reminds us that such actions must not be repressed.² On the other hand, we should be emboldened by these initiatives to call for greater government support and protection. Pope St. John Paul II affirmed that communities on a higher level ought to “support the smaller community and help to coordinate its activity with activities in the rest of society for the sake of the common good.”³

We exhort our communities and institutions to help support these groups organizing community pantries. We can do this in several ways: donate goods or co-organize with some of our students, staff, or alumni; if police harassment occurs or legal support is needed, we may help out by sharing with them briefers such as the ones attached here from Ateneo Human Rights Center, coordinating with relevant government agencies such as the Commission on Human Rights, or by linking them up with local lawyer groups we know or with law schools in our universities.

Lastly, we should continue to speak up. We laud certain government units and officials for supporting and coordinating with community pantry organizers. We recognize the top Philippine defense and military officials who expressed support for these peaceful initiatives. But we still continue to call on the national government to give a clarion call of support for the organizers and to oppose groups within its own ranks that antagonize this beacon of hope. Let us not allow this light of hope and renewal symbolized by the pantries to be snuffed out by those who threaten our dignity and liberties.

May the Peace of the Risen Lord continue to console and to give us courage during these difficult times!

Signed by the Society of Jesus Social Apostolate Commission

¹ *Fratelli Tutti* 115

² Plenary Council of the Philippines 2 #327-328

³ *Centesimus Annus* 48