News



Sergio Valverde Espinoza, a Catholic priest of the Cristo Rey church who modified a popular song called "Sopa de Caracol," or Snail Soup in English, sings and dances during a Mass in San Jose, Costa Rica, Sunday, May 2, 2021. Valverde changed the song's lyrics to a message calling for the use of face masks and care during the pandemic. (AP/Carlos Gonzalez)

Javier Cordoba

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San Jose, Costa Rica — May 4, 2021

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A Roman Catholic priest better known for his outreach to the poor is winning new fans with his catchy public health-focused lyrics set to a popular 1990s salsa tune as Costa Rica experiences its worst moment of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the past two Sundays, Sergio Valverde has performed his song and choreographed dance at the front of Cristo Rey church south of San Jose. His aim is getting people to wear protective masks and continue being careful.

"Without the mask, there's COVID for you, COVID for me," goes Valverde's reworked chorus for the song "Sopa de Caracol" or "Snail Soup."

Valverde said he hadn't even written down his rendition, but rather was improvising. Its viral spread on social media surprised him.

"The issue of COVID is affecting the entire world, there's pain, there's suffering," Valverde said. "I, as a priest, see so many people suffering, sick, in pain, people without work and who are dying of hunger and I wanted to help a little."

Valverde's timing couldn't be better. Costa Rica tallied more than 2,700 new infections one day last week, a record. The intensive care units of its public hospitals have reached 95% capacity. In total, the country has recorded more than 3,200 COVID-19 deaths.

On Monday, the government forced nonessential businesses in the country's central region to close and imposed restrictions limiting vehicular traffic.

Valverde is known for his ministry to abandoned children and for giving food to the poor. The economic crisis deepened by the pandemic has meant he's seeing more need than ever before, he said.

His performance has made it to Honduran Pilo Tejeda, the composer of the Spanish version, who now says he will record Valverde's new version with him.

"The whole world is so crazy that they looked for another nut," Valverde said, admitting that he has enjoyed the experience.

Sopa de Caracol itself is an adaptation of the Garifuna song written and performed by Belizean Hernán "Chico" Ramos. The song performed by Honduran group Banda Blanca took off in 1991.

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