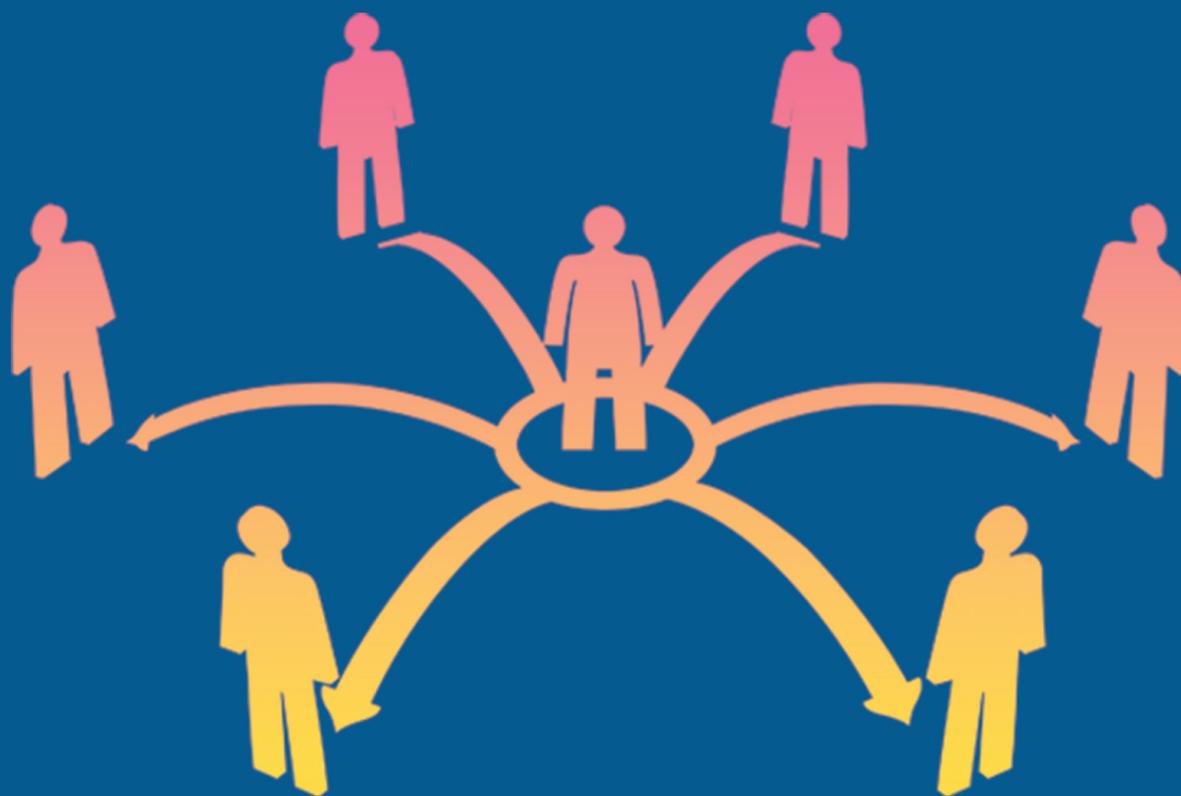


# Church **New** Communication in the **Normal**

*Perspectives from Asia and Beyond*



Anthony Le Duc, SVD  
Editor

**Church Communication  
in the New Normal  
Perspectives from Asia and Beyond**



**Church Communication  
in the New Normal**  
**Perspectives from Asia and Beyond**

Edited by  
**Anthony Le Duc, SVD**



**Asian Research Center  
for Religion and Social Communication  
Bangkok  
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## X CHURCH COMMUNICATION IN THE NEW NORMAL

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## FOREWORD

Shortly after the release of his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis wrote a book with the British Journalist, Austen Ivereigh, entitled *Let Us Dream: A Path to a Better Future*. Among the many profound insights in this book, two are particularly relevant to this present volume of articles on *Church Communication in the New Normal: Perspectives from Asia and Beyond*.

First, in the Prologue to his book, Pope Francis writes: “The question is whether you’re going to come through this crisis and if so, how. The basic rule of a crisis is that you don’t come out of it the same. If you get through it, you come out better or worse, but never the same.” In a certain sense, the articles in this volume exemplify the truth of this statement of Pope Francis. They all attempt to explore how things, particularly in the area of communication, can be done differently and better in the new normal. Indeed, they heed Pope Francis’ insight that the COVID-19 pandemic is actually a call to re-organize the way we live life and the way we do things in life. It would indeed be a mistake if, after all of this is over, we simply bracket off the experience of the pandemic, file it away and archive it, and then go back to where we left off and continue with life as before. Rather, the challenge is for us to treasure this experience and allow it to shape the way we live life from hereon. This is what the articles in this volume admirably attempt to do.

Secondly, in Part One of the book, Pope Francis states: “You have to go to the edges of existence if you want to see the world as it is. I’ve always thought that the world looks clearer from the periphery . . . . You have to make for the margins to find a new future.” And in Part Three of the book, he adds: “To embrace the margins is to expand our horizons, for we see more clearly and broadly from the edges of society.” This volume also exemplifies this approach to the construction of the new normal, that is, of seeing reality not from the center but from the periphery. Written by scholars from Asia or based in Asia, the articles in this volume are indeed an attempt to imagine a new world from

the perspective of the periphery of the developed world and of the Universal Church. Voices from such places as South Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, the Syro-Malabar Church, and even from indigenous peoples (e.g., the Australian Aborigines and the Kankanaeys in Northern Philippines) are made to resound in this volume, providing heretofore unconsidered perspectives for addressing global problems.

As such, then, this volume is a unique contribution to the building of a world of universal fraternity which, according to Pope Francis, is the Church's mission in the new normal. As Pope Francis puts it: "Fraternity is today our new frontier" (*Let Us Dream*, III). He adds: "Now is the time for ... a new humanism that can harness this eruption of fraternity, to put an end to the globalization of indifference and the hyperinflation of the individual. We need to feel again that we need each other, that we have a responsibility for others, including for those not yet born and for those not yet deemed to be citizens" (*Let Us Dream*, I). Further, he says: "To dream of a different future we need to choose fraternity over individualism as our organizing principle. Fraternity, the sense of belonging to each other and to the whole of humanity, is the capacity to come together and work together against a shared horizon of possibility" (*Let Us Dream*, II).

At the heart of this mission of fraternity is communication. For a world of human fraternity can only be built on the basis of a "culture of encounter." As Pope Francis puts it, "the process of building fraternity, be it local or universal, can only be undertaken by spirits that are free and open to authentic encounters" (FT 50). Further, he says: "In today's world, the sense of belonging to a single human family is fading, and the dream of working together for justice and peace seems an outdated utopia. What reigns instead is a cool, comfortable and globalized indifference .... Isolation and withdrawal into one's own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal. Rather, it is closeness; it is the culture of encounter. Isolation, no; closeness, yes. Culture clash, no; culture of encounter, yes" (FT 30).

But, aside from being a path to the building of fraternity, the culture of encounter—and, thus, communication—is actually a requirement of human nature. "Human beings are so made that they cannot live, develop and find

fulfilment except ‘in the sincere gift of self to others.’ Nor can they fully know themselves apart from an encounter with other persons: ‘I communicate effectively with myself only insofar as I communicate with others ....’ This is part of the mystery of authentic human existence. ‘Life exists where there is bonding, communion, fraternity; and life is stronger than death when it is built on true relationships and bonds of fidelity. On the contrary, there is no life when we claim to be self-sufficient and live as islands: in these attitudes, death prevails’” (FT 87).

Crucial, then, to the promotion of a culture of encounter and thus to the building of a world of fraternity is how communication is carried out in life. Communication must help build a world not on the basis of power, control, competition and the accumulation of wealth, but rather on tenderness, compassion, solidarity and the sharing of resources. This requires that communication be carried out in a new way—a way of communicating that is less aggressive, less coercive, less destructive, and more respectful, more humble, more courteous. This is precisely what this volume offers—an exploration into ways of communicating that truly build a world of human fraternity.

We owe a profound depth of gratitude to Anthony Le Duc, SVD, the editor of this volume, as well as its various contributors, for offering us a truly valuable resource for imagining life in the new normal, which I wholeheartedly recommend to everyone.

It responds to the appeal which Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, jointly made in the “Declaration on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” which they signed together on February 4, 2019 in Abu Dhabi:

In the name of *human fraternity*, that embraces all human beings, unites them and renders them equal; In the name of this *fraternity* torn apart by policies of extremism and division, by systems of unrestrained profit or by hateful ideological tendencies that manipulate the actions and the future of men and women;... In the name of God and of everything stated thus far, [we] declare the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the

path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard. (FT 285)

Indeed, it is not only possible but necessary to build a world of universal fraternity. As the recently concluded SIGNIS World Congress 2022 states: “We believe that it is possible to build a new society by creating awareness that inspires us to work together in peace with people of different cultures, beliefs, religions, and ideologies.

May this volume inspire the creation of a culture of dialogue and encounter toward the building of a world of universal fraternity.

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# ENDORSEMENTS

COVID-19 has devastated many Asian countries causing untold deaths and destroying their economies and social relations, especially among the poor, who could not have access to vaccines. The virus has also severely disturbed the rhythm of Church life, particularly in worship and daily Christian activities. While the pandemic is still causing long-term havoc in Asia, it has introduced a ‘new normal’ into the continent. *Church Communication in the New Normal*, a collection of essays written by Asian social scientists, theologians, and pastoral agents, is the first volume that deals with how the Church in Asia can resume its prophetic mission, liturgical worship, and pastoral ministry in times of pandemic and post-pandemic. I enthusiastically recommend this volume, a fruit of profound scholarship and pastoral sensitivity, not only to all who live and work in Asia but also to those living on other continents, both Christians and followers of other religions, who work for human flourishing.

*Peter C. Phan*

*The Ignacio Ellacuria Chair of Catholic Social Thought, Georgetown University, USA*

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This fascinating volume helpfully combines compelling case studies of the Church responses to the pandemic from throughout Asia with analyses examining the opportunities and challenges offered by the pandemic both to Church communication and to the self-understanding of the Church. It should be essential reading for pastoral ministers, scholars, and communication officers.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has become a historical event with a distinct ‘before’ and ‘after.’ After COVID-19, in our new normal, we understand and speak of certain experiences now in a different way. Religious communal experiences, including worship, fellowship and pastoral care are among these experiences. Before the pandemic, those invested in pastoral communication and its practices often had to make the case that the communicative aspects of faith and ministry matter profoundly and integrally. In our new normal after COVID-19, we have seen that the communication of faith makes tremendous difference in faith, ministry and communal religious experience overall. When during COVID-19 our experiences of community were conveyed through live-streamed gatherings, this fact became crystallized. *Church Communication in the New Normal* does timely and important scholarly work exploring the across-the-board emergence of faith communication as an essential aspect of ministry. Using COVID-19 as an overall case study, each chapter of *Church Communication in the New Normal* demonstrates the integral role of communication in the way a community of faith gathers, worships and extends care. The book also showcases creative directions for ministry in light of the pandemic experience, all the while rooting the study contextually across a variety of cultural locations both distinct but common, especially from the perspective of faith. This book is an essential addition to global scholarly reflection on pastoral communication.

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# INTRODUCTION

*Anthony Le Duc, SVD*

It must be stated at the outset that all the chapters in this book were researched and written during the coronavirus pandemic which made its first appearance in the Chinese province of Wuhan in the waning days of 2019, then making its way to every continent of the world bringing upheavals and calamities to countries and peoples in multiple successive waves. In fact, some of the chapters were written at a time when the pandemic was raging or regaining momentum in the country where the author was residing, wreaking untold havoc on the lives and the livelihood of the people. By the time this book is published, it is likely that in many countries, the pandemic is still rampant or is re-surg-ing with a new wave and a new strain, infecting even those who have been triple or quadruple vaccinated. And despite some countries having declared COVID-19 endemic in order to move beyond the pandemic mentality which can be debilitating economically, socially, and psychologically, this book does not make any pretense at claims of clarity due to divinely endowed wisdom or the benefit of hindsight. Any assertion of clarity, if there is such a thing, would have to wait months and even years from the scheduled publication of this volume to have any credibility.

Having said that, one of the extraordinary gifts of human beings is the ability to simultaneously experience the present, while reflecting on the past and gazing towards the future – synthesizing all the dimensions of life – temporal, spatial, and spiritual – into a logical and meaningful narrative that can serve as a foundation and inspiration for individual and communal self-understanding and plans of action. Indeed, the task of sense-making does not take place only on a personal level; we also have the ability to reflect collectively, thus benefitting from group wisdom and reducing risks of parochialism, myopism, extremism, and the countless other negative ‘isms’ that assert themselves when there is a lack of dialogue and mutual sharing of ideas, experiences, and aspirations. We also fall into this trap when the individual human mind is allowed too freely to ruminate without the necessary restraints – self-imposed or otherwise.

Thus, it is with this goal of gathering the fruits of individual and group reflections that the work of creating this volume was initiated and carried out – not as a systematic study of the theme of this book, rather a combination of puzzle pieces that contribute to unveiling an extremely complex and grand picture of a world undergoing unprecedented changes and of humanity attempting to cope with what has been labeled perhaps in a clichéd manner as the ‘new normal.’ Despite this expression resurfacing in popular culture and being widely applied to the state of the world brought about by the pandemic, what exactly characterizes this new normal in the present, what it will ultimately look like in the days to come, and how long it will take for a newer normal to replace the present one remain issues that not many people have examined in a systematic way. On the other hand, one is not sure that any such attempt will yield anything more than well-reasoned conjectures. The truth is while human beings would like to believe that we can control the directions of global developments through our carefully devised sustainability goals and admirable scientific and technological ingenuities, the SARS-Cov-2 virus that gave us the COVID-19 pandemic reminded us that a tiny biotic creature invisible to the naked eye and can readily mutate to ensure its chances of survival can throw a gigantic monkey wrench into all our meticulously thought-out five-year and ten-year plans.

Despite the wide-ranging topics presented in this collection, this volume takes ‘communication’ as the keyword for the various research and reflections on the life and mission of the Catholic Church during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as post-crisis. The reader will readily recognize that what is referred to as ‘communication’ here is an extremely elastic and multi-dimensional category. Within the context of the Church, particularly as discussed in this book, communication refers to words and images that the Church transmits to the faithful and to the world to help the people cope with issues brought about by the crisis. This communication helps contextualize these dramatic events in sound theological principles which need to again and again be creatively restated and reaffirmed with every human happening, both big and small, that takes place. Second, communication also refers to pastoral and evangelizing actions carried out by the Church and its members to sustain the life of the Church amid the grave situation of imposed isolation, pastors and members of the flock succumbing to COVID-19, shuttered church doors, and unlit altar candles. Third, communication refers to the models and strategies by the Church and its leaders to employ technological means to promote ecclesial communion, nourish the faith life of the people, and to dialogue with individuals and groups

to create a truly synodal Church. Finally, communication also refers to ways that the Church discerns and engages with the signs of the times in order to transform raw experiences into valuable lessons, human suffering into salvific grace, and pandemic isolation and division into greater post-pandemic interculturality, interdependence, and collaboration.

In this book, the chapters are divided into two parts (with some observable overlaps). The first part presents a set of larger theological, missiological, and pastoral issues that have been highlighted by the coronavirus pandemic. In Chapter One, we recognize that communication begins first and foremost with God who reveals God's self to humanity throughout history and continues to do so in contemporary global, local, and personal events. Gnaana Patrick reflects in this chapter questions concerning theodicy and proposes that it is perhaps now time to go beyond them and look theologically into how we may endeavour to seek and experience God who communicates and reveals God's self in the ongoing present in an empowering way. Such an endeavour can be more meaningfully undertaken in and through practical theologies as expressed in pastoral actions of solidarity with the victims to alleviate their sufferings; it can also be meaningfully undertaken in the Asian context as theological reflections, bringing insights emerging from different religious traditions of Asia into creative conversations.

In Chapter Two, Norman Melchor R. Peña Jr reflects on the words of Christ in his last moments on the cross and highlights the correlative resonance between this Christological experience and the experience of communication in the new normal. Peña Jr demonstrates that these utterances of Christ can serve as a guiding beacon to how religious communication can be effectuated as humanity undergoes a reality that reflects that of Christ on the cross. In the unfolding events of the world, Christ's last words never die but continue to live inspiring a sevenfold praxis of hope: 1) entreaty, 2) disclosure, 3) relationship, 4) isolation, 5) exigency, 6) fulfillment, and 7) entrustment. Each relates with narrative experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic inviting persons not only to approach communication as a process of transmission but as semiotics offering newfound meanings and significance. Here communication never fails as listeners focus on the self-significance of the message. Religious communication enables people to seek what is best for those who receive the message and centers on how they could grow not only in faith but likewise as human beings who bear God's image and likeness.

In Chapter Three, Christina Kheng discusses the Church's approach to missionary communication and highlights the need for paradigm shifts

associated with the Church's assumed role, priorities, language, epistemology, and partnerships. Kheng proposes that the search for meaning and values prompted by the coronavirus pandemic and other crises plaguing humanity calls for missionary communication to transition from preaching to promoting a journey of enquiring together, from maintenance to missionary outreach, from exclusive to universal languages for divine truths, from theoretical discourse to contemplation, and from unilateral action to pro-active collaboration.

In Chapter Four, Lazar T. Stanislaus addresses the theme of the book from the perspective of intercultural communication and proposes interculturality as an appropriate approach to responding to a changing world due to globalization, migration, and trans-nationalization. As society is well on its way from being monocultural to multicultural, adopting interculturality means undergoing a series of conversion from negative tendencies such as ethnocentrism, egoism, narrow nationalism, consumerism, and triumphalism to more inclusive worldviews that include being willing to engage in interreligious dialogue, being open to other peoples, and caring for creation.

In Chapter Five, Robert Kisala discusses the importance of interreligious dialogue to address the negative impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on interreligious relations globally in addition to already existing tensions pre-pandemic time. Kisala asserts that in the post-pandemic period, religious actors will be called upon to play a leading role in addressing some of the problems that have been highlighted during the pandemic. The interreligious dialogue agenda will include such tasks as promoting sound public policy that serves the common good, battling scapegoating and a conspiratorial mindset, building solidarity in order to address societal disparities, and preservation of the environment.

In Chapter Six, Michael Q. Nguyen calls attention to the prophetic communicative role of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in warning about the immediate and long-term dangers of human neglect in caring for creation. The presence of the coronavirus forced human beings away from the streets, the skies, and out of natural places, thus providing a brief but clearly observable change to the quality of the environment. However, this respite is far from adequate and not nearly the 're-set' that many people were hoping for. For long-term and lasting improvements in the ecology, changes need to take place within the human person, which means that human beings must undergo an ecological conversion. Nguyen proposes that the human-creation model of 'Master and Slave' must be replaced with the model of 'Shepherd and Sheep.' In this model, the Church becomes a Green Church that extends 'caritas' to all of creation,

and is imbued with the sense of interconnectedness as exemplified by the life of Francis of Assisi and the Australian Aborigines.

In Chapter Seven, Anthony Le Duc examines the communicative role of religious leaders during the coronavirus crisis with particular attention to the use of digital social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. The study shows that religious communication during the pandemic was multi-dimensional, serving to: 1) communicate personal presence of the religious leader; 2) communicate sound theological and spiritual wisdom to the faithful; 3) communicate divine presence through religious rituals; 4) communicate useful and correct information to the public; and 5) communicate examples of proper behavior. The author argues that this multi-dimensional communicative role is unique to the position of the religious leader who is not only respected by their adherents but also by the wider public. Therefore, it is imperative that religious leaders continue to explore ways to exercise digital leadership by utilizing various communicative channels to fulfill this role in the present and future in order to promote *ad intra* and *ad extra* religious harmony and solidarity, as well as providing social and spiritual nourishment to people under their care.

In Chapter Eight, Leo-Martin Angelo R. Ocampo analyzes the use and meaning of online liturgies by the Church to provide the faithful with continual spiritual nourishment during enforced lockdowns and social distancing measures promulgated by governmental authorities. The chapter traces the historical evolution of remote participation in liturgy in the Catholic Church from radio to the Internet parallel with the development of the Church's official stance. It then gathers the experience of online liturgies during the pandemic in both its positive and negative aspects. Finally, it attempts to articulate and begin to unfold some questions for liturgical teleparticipation in view of the new normal.

The second part of the book focuses on a number of local contexts as the Church deals with the impact of the pandemic and gathers lessons for the future. In Chapter Nine, Rico C. Jacoba explores the changes to the concept of 'neighborhood' as a result of digital technological development and internet use, which became intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Neighborhood is where relationships are formed, nurtured, and sustained through social and religious engagement and support. The Church's presence and effective faith communication at the level of the neighborhood is necessary for the Church to survive and thrive despite challenges, even those as serious as the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to presenting how neighborhoods changed over time

until the present global crisis, the author also presents how Church leaders can exercise creativity to respond to the spiritual needs of the neighborhood Church.

In Chapter Ten, Anthony Quyen Huy Nguyen examines the reality of the pandemic in the Vietnamese context and proposes ‘prophetic dialogue with realities’ as the pastoral communication approach that can be implemented by the Church in Vietnam to address present dilemmas as well as future challenges. Realities are by nature complex and various problems cannot be solved quickly. Thus, prophetic dialogue requires commitment and courage, but also a good dose of patience. Unlike vaccines, dialogue is a dynamic and ever-evolving process in which various participants faithfully engage with each other – not a do-it-yourself or a quick fix to the world’s ailments.

In Chapter Eleven, Ignatius Minsoo Kim discusses the Church’s pastoral directions based on his own pastoral experience as well as analysis of several surveys conducted by the Church in South Korea during the early stages of the pandemic in this country. Kim argues that based on the reality of the speed of technological development and its incorporation into human lives, especially of the young people, the events of the pandemic that caused accelerated use of digital media for Church communication and celebrations, and openness of the faithful towards further incorporation of digital communication technologies into the activities of the Church, the directions of pastoral ministry in Korea needs to follow a model that centers on the integration of both online and offline dimensions in a cohesive manner.

In Chapter Twelve, Brandon Billan Cadingpal explores the role of traditional cultural elements in helping to inform the people about contemporary events in human life and become resources to cope with crisis in a meaningful, effective, and unique way. Specifically, Cadingpal studies the pandemic coping experience of the Kankanaeys in the Philippines through their adaptation of the traditional ‘*Tengan*’ practice and the utilization of associated traditional values ingrained in the Kankanaey culture. The author argues that the pandemic experience of the Kankanaeys serves to highlight the significance and the adaptability of traditional cultural elements and values in dealing with modern-day issues faced by individuals and groups.

In Chapter Thirteen, Robin Xavier, Mariot Jose Panjikaran, Angel Treasa Alex, and Nandini Lakshmikantha investigate the usage of online platforms for religious communication by the Syro-Malabar Catholic community in Kerala, India, particularly during and in the post pandemic situations. By analyzing the results of a series of surveys, the authors conclude that the COVID-19

pandemic gave rise to an induced online religion, which was transient and showed signs of ebbing as the pandemic became less intense. While the community still pose notable resistance against accommodating online religion, the authors observe that there is a surge in the religion online practices, and it could be deemed as a positive sign in the pastoral communication efforts to reach all the groups that comprise the Church.

In Chapter Fourteen, John Patrick Murray reflects on the topic of ecclesial communion through his own experience with the expatriate church community in Bangkok, Thailand. Murray sees the benefit of the pandemic in highlighting the existing strengths and weaknesses of a society and any system within it. This proved so for this faith community with its pre-existing condition of weak communication structures. During a pandemic, communication became more important than ever. When a faith community can no longer gather, it exists within a rarefied atmosphere where the normal and accepted communication structures could no longer be taken for granted. The chapter presents the author's reflection on what has been happening so as to help proceed in a more purposeful way to build up life based on the held belief that a new and better era would arise from this pandemic. This belief is a key tenet held by Pope Francis for the future of the Church in a post-pandemic world. It is no simple returning to life as it was.

In Chapter Fifteen, John Mishen and Anthony Le Duc explore the creative ways in which pastoral agents from various countries around the world employ information and communication technology (ICT) in order to overcome the limitations imposed upon their normal ministry by the reality of the pandemic and to respond to the urgent need for spiritual and social support from the people. Despite the inspirational and creative ways that pastoral agents employed ICT to carry on their work in extremely difficult situations, the authors believe that ICT was often turned to in a reflexive manner, without adequate prior training, and without the necessary examination of pastoral and theological implications of the practices. Thus, as the Church moves on from the pandemic, its leaders and pastoral agents need to process and reflect on this issue in a more systematic manner to discover effective and theologically sound directions in making use of digital technology to sustain and nourish the life of the Church.

In Chapter Sixteen, Trong Quang Pham discusses the need for devising a systematic and ongoing hospital chaplaincy program in Vietnam, where most hospitals and clinics are under the control of the communist government that looks at religions with great wariness and suspicion. Therefore, hospital

chaplaincy in Vietnam tends to be informal, despite the availability of many priests, religious, and lay volunteers who are willing to engage in this ministry. However, during one of the most intense waves of the pandemic in Vietnam causing hospitals to be overwhelmed and medical staff stretched thin, the government allowed for Catholic pastoral agents to serve as volunteers in these facilities. Pham believes that this positive experience may serve as the impetus for future collaboration between the Church and the government in Vietnam in order to implement a hospital chaplaincy program that would supplement the medical treatments already received by patients.

Chapter Seventeen, authored by Vince Henry M. Salles, is the final contribution to this volume. In this chapter, Salles presents the communicative role of the chaplains as articulated by four priests from the Order of Saint Camillus in the Philippines. Based on extensive interviews with the chaplains, the author analyzes and presents the communicative strategies that the chaplains employed to minister to patients, families, and hospital workers. Despite multiple limitations imposed upon them by hospital safety protocols, the chaplains were able to exercise their multi-dimensional roles as listeners, liturgists, counselors, comforters, and accompanists. In terms of post-pandemic implications, the author believes that the chaplaincy experience during this crisis could serve as source of valuable lessons that help to discover best practices and new directions for training future hospital chaplains.

Finally, what we can see in this volume is that all the contributors are either writing from Asia or are Asian even if they are living in another part of the world, e.g., Europe or the United States. Asians, however, are part of the global Church, and discussions are not limited to the local situation alone. While Part Two of the book focuses largely on specific Asian geographical contexts, Part One presents discussions and reflections that concern the Church as a whole. What this eclectic set of research presentations demonstrates is that boundaries only exist as a human mental construct and much more fragile than we would like to believe. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly proved that no matter how much we try to impose borders around localities and countries or isolate ourselves from one another, these measures of separation can be easily breached by the coronavirus. The insistence on maintaining strict isolation and confinement oftentimes only resulted in greater suffering and frustration. The life of the Church is the same. The local Church finds its full meaning in relations to the universal Church, and the universal Church carries out its mission with people not in an air-tight vacuum but in specific circumstances and places. As the Church strains forward in the new normal with its losses,

grief, uncertainties, and challenges, it is my hope that the discussions on Church communication in this book reflect this spirit of looking for greater meaning in particular events, searching for a long-term vision from the present, and turning ongoing experience into transforming lessons.



# **Part One**

## **Considerations for the Global Church**

# COVID-19: Responding Theologically from the Asian Context

*Gnana Patrick*

## The ‘Whence and Wherefore’ in Theodicy

While thinking of a theological response to COVID-19, what generally comes to mind are questions of theodicy on the co-existence of a benevolent and powerful God on the one hand and the reality of evil on the other. The Christian experience of God, as witnessed to in the scripture and tradition, dwelling upon the sovereignty of Godhood on the one hand and the utter powerlessness as exhibited on the cross by the incarnate God on the other, counsels us towards varied theological responses. We find very many of them being proposed today. Among them, one may find two basic categories: one, a denial of any relationship between God and evil and the other an affirmation of the same.

The first category believes in a God who does not involve in the temporal events allowing the humans to make their own responses. Long ago the Deists argued similarly by saying God was like a clock maker, who after producing the clock, did not interfere with its functioning. Similarly, we have present-day deists who lay the entire responsibility on the humans and find no relationship between the pandemic and God. They stoutly defend the free will of humans and stay away from any divine interference. This is a rather simplistic response, which saves much theological trouble, but is not vibrant and does not engage a believer in suffering.

The second category of ‘affirmation’ is nuanced and varied. One finds several strands under this category. On one extreme side, there are those who take the pandemic as a punishment from God. We hear reports (Basumatary 2022, 237) about religious leaders – pastors, imams, and rabbis telling their believers that God has sent this pandemic because of human sinfulness as

found, for example, in the practice of gay, lesbian, and homosexual activities. Such claims, though some would opine that they are intended for corrective behaviour, cannot be accepted as good theologies of pandemic; they may, on the other hand, bear anti-witness to the God of love as found in the Bible and in the history of Christian spirituality. Sadly enough, we also hear from overly zealous evangelical pastors that God has punished humanity because they have not fully accepted Jesus Christ as their saviour. This, once again, goes against the unfathomable mystery of the divine that is at the heart of the Christian experience of God and manifests in manifold ways.

Another strand of the theological response, following up on the foregoing one yet distinctly different, is approaching God as someone who tests our faith through this pandemic so that we can ultimately be rewarded with victory. This approach, as intoned by the book of Job, is premised on the claim that it is our faith in God that is put to test through pain, suffering, calamities, disasters, and pandemic, along with loss of peace, joy, happiness, and prosperity, and if we are able to sustain our faith through the struggles, we will also emerge victoriously from out of the suffering. But whether an ever-loving God would need to test the people so cruelly so as to ascertain their faith is a question this theological proposition finds it difficult to answer.

Along the same line but emphasising more on the opportunity to grow towards perfection, a theological response proposes that it is by facing up to sufferings that human beings grow towards perfection. Irenaeus, one of the second-third century Christian theologians, intoned this theological thinking by underlining two stages in creation of humanity: first stage, 'made in the image of God,' and the second, 'made in the likeness of God' (Basumatary, 233). While the image of God is imprinted in our nature right from our inception, it is the likeness that we will obtain by perfecting our lives on earth. Our human life is a long duree of endeavouring with the grace of God to realise the likeness of God, working through pain and suffering on the embedded image of God in us.

Yet another theological response is a call for experiencing the hidden presence or hand of God working through us amidst the pandemic challenges. God is neither absent from us nor testing our faith nor judging over us, but working through us in an invisible way. It is with the power of God that we face up to the pandemic, explore vaccinations, organise a care regime, etc. The great saga of Christian faith, originating from the fountain of the faith experience of the Israelites, has encountered on several occasions the 'hidden face / presence' of God in its long journey. As the prophet Isaiah exclaimed, "Truly, you are a God who hides himself (sic), O God of Israel, Saviour!" (Is. 45:15); the faith of

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the Israelites had a singular place for the hidden face of God. The Hebrew Bible has good number of other instances wherein God hides God's face.<sup>1</sup> What stands out in these instances is the message that God hides God's face from the people by way of punishing them for their sins. It is a manner of depriving people of God's presence so that they can amend from their sins and return.

But there is yet another sense in which God's hiddenness is experienced in the Biblical tradition. It is in the way we *strive to seek after God* so as to search and find God amidst the pandemics. The hiddenness of God solicits the human effort to encounter the presence of God amidst the shadow cast by the evil. Addressing the Athenians, Paul brings up the notion of the 'unknown God' and goes on to say that God who made the world and everything in it does not live in shrines made by human hands and that we need to "search for God and perhaps grope for him (sic) and find him" (sic) (Acts 17:27), even though we 'live and move and have our being' in the very reality of God (Acts 17:28). God who is so intimately present to us is yet absent to us! Applying this insight to our present-day reality, Songram Basumatary, an Indian moral theologian rues:

God is ever-present in absence. God is closer in distance. One may ask if God is absent during COVID-19 pandemic! Or God is at distance from human suffering! But in contrary, the pandemic truly has challenged us for a change in our entire perception of God's presence in the world once again. In fact, it has led us to realise that by being hidden in the sufferings, God comes closer to us! (2022, 243)

Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and others from the Reformation tradition have pointed out to an experience of the 'hidden God' or that of the 'rearward parts of God' during moments of suffering. According to Luther's thesis 20, "... anyone who understands the visible rearward parts of God as observed in suffering and the cross does deserve to be called a theologian."

These, then, are some of the salient theological responses given traditionally and are being repeated or reproduced with context-specific creative interpretations. They dwell primarily upon the origin (whence) or the end (wherefore) of evil in terms of divine interventions. What has been the mainstay of these responses has been a strong ontological realism wherein the Godhood as an objective reality out there is taken for granted with absolute epistemological certainty. 'That God is out there' is a faith-claim with its own

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Dt. 31: 17-18, 32:20, Mic. 3:4, Ez. 39:23, 24, Is. 54:8, 57:17, 64:7, Ps. 30:7, Jer. 33:5, Hos. 5:6, Job. 13:24.

valid religious reasoning is not sufficiently appreciated, but instead a modernist epistemological reasoning is conflated with religious reasoning. Going by such epistemological reasoning, we unwittingly sacrifice the power and potential of faith on the altar of a form of reasoning that arose during the modern era.

In order to appreciate the human *endeavour* of faith, we need to consider the postmodern interlude that has occurred in several fields, including the fields of philosophy, epistemology, philosophy of religion, and theology. This interlude, which goes with a post-metaphysical thinking, has brought to our awareness the untenability of metaphysical claims or ‘metanarratives’ with universal objectivist claims. Linguistic philosophy has added to this realisation by bringing to our awareness the fact that our experience of reality is ultimately language-ridden and therefore we can only come up with manifold discourses or language formations on our experience of reality, including God. They are all our endeavours, incessant and earnest ones to approximate the reality in its fullness. But we can always fail and falter and therefore always ready to revise and amend. Perhaps the core implication of this interlude is the realisation that we humans can only approach reality, especially the divine reality from our own human context and that we cannot make absolute statements on behalf of God as if they are ‘ontologically’ valid beyond history, space, and time.

From this postmodern realisation, Christian theodicy needs to become explorative rather than stipulative and enunciative; informed with deep quests rather than solution-mongering; propositional rather than proving; witnessing rather than imposing; praying rather than instructing; interacting rather than presuming; etc. We need to move beyond either an encumbered or a pre-occupied consciousness, though being mindful of the fact that our consciousness is situated in historical contexts and that our consciousness always *intends* towards a goal. We need to engage, involve, and explore the ‘ever-present’ ongoing present, with a spiritual attitude of approaching the divine mystery that surrounds us. We need to approach God as mystery divine, manifest in several forms, including the bodily incarnation in Jesus Christ. While approaching God as mystery, it is not merely the history of the incarnate God, but the mystery of Jesus the Christ that foregrounds our theological propensities. The mystery divine can be received not merely through noetic or cognitive formulations of the theo-presence, but also through symbols, rituals and activities of care, concern, solidarity, and support. In such an approach, the starting point is one of receiving the rays of divine revelations in our living here and now rather than beginning with pre-conceived notions of the divine.

### **Engaging the ‘On-going Present’ Theologically**

A.K. Anderson has some sane advice in this regard: Classical Christian theodicy has for long dwelt upon, as pointed out by him, on ‘protology,’ ‘eschatology,’ and ‘Christology’ – meaning questions of origin of evil, the ultimate end point of evil and the redemptive role of Christ against evil. However, as he reflects in an article entitled “From Zurich to Todtnauberg” (2018, 40), there is an ‘ongoing present,’ which is in-between the origin and end, and during this time, human action inspired by God gets focused – action which bears witness to the divine amidst us. Interpreting two poems by Paul Celan, which the latter wrote after meeting with Nelly Sachs and Martin Heidegger, wherein Celan ruminates over Sachs’ firm faith in God against the background of the Holocaust on the one hand and indignantly on Heidegger’s silence over Nazism on the other. Anderson reflects that classical theodicy is not able to answer questions implied in Celan’s indignation. However, new insights are manifest in the poem which discloses itself that human agents here and now witness to divine presence through their actions against evil. By ‘protesting’ against evil, or resisting evil, humans find themselves experiencing the ‘divine compassion,’ the divine grace in the here and now. In his own words:

Humans find ourselves in the here and now, we regularly encounter new instances of evil around us, and the responsibility for addressing these lies in our hands. As such, as in the Zurich poem, humans can work in the present moment to alleviate suffering and bring solace to the hurting. In the enestological perspective, the divine is working through these deeds of humanity, but unlike with the protological, Christological, and eschatological stances, the primary action in this viewpoint is on the part of humans. (Ibid, 40)

An enestological perspective, thus, is one that takes that the sufferings’ origin may not be evident or end may not be visible, but it is our efforts at responding to suffering which generate the experience of the Grace, the loving power of God. Quoting Wendy Farley, Anderson says, “In the very heart of suffering and oppression” human “resistance to evil is possible; in this resistance divine compassion becomes incarnate. Such incarnation comes about only through human action” (Ibid, 40).

There is much relevance and energy in approaching our pandemic enestologically, taking on our present moment of suffering as an opportunity to

experience the 'divine energy becoming incarnate' through our actions. Cross is not a symbol for an objectivising contemplative gaze, but an invitation for struggle against inimical forces. The early Christian community, even as it bore the trials of becoming a Christian community, and even as it was focused upon the future glory to be obtained in the return of the Son of God, lived out the turbulent 'ongoing present' by 'going out of itself' through charitable actions. The famine which occurred (Acts 11: 27-30) during the early Christian era was responded to by the disciples by sending relief to those affected. Those affected by famine were not ignored or set aside because of a highly intense apocalyptic expectation. The 'ongoing present,' a time in-between, was indeed an invitation to experience the 'coming God' for the early Christians.

Jurgen Moltmann, a theologian who has reflected much upon the theology of hope, presents a participatory understanding of God, who reveals God's self through the Cross of Christ to be lived out by the humans through their meetings with sufferings. Moltmann speaks of a 'divine situation or sphere of pathos' which reveals itself through our suffering on the one hand and hope and prayer on the other. It is not an 'idea' of God, but a 'situation' of God, a 'site' for Divine-human endeavour to overcome suffering. The 'divine pathos,' which keeps working through creation (Paul speaking about the creation groaning is a case in point Rom. 8:22), evokes human 'sympathy,' i.e., ameliorative participation which opens the human to be present to the present of the other, to love and suffer and be loved and suffered. This situation of divine pathos induces a sympathetic union with God, which makes the human to suffer with God's pathos, to love with God's love and to hope with God's hope. In his own words,

In the situation of the *pathos* of God he becomes a *homo sympathetica*. The divine *pathos* is reflected in man's participation, his hopes and his prayers. Sympathy is the openness of a person to the present of another. It has the structure of dialogue. In the *pathos* of God, man is filled with the spirit of God. He becomes the friend of God, feels sympathy with God and for God. He does not enter into a mystical union but into a sympathetic union with God. He is angry with God's wrath. He suffers with God's suffering. He loves with God's love. He hopes with God's hope. (1993, 272)

Ernst Bloch, who inspired Moltmann with his three volumes on *The Principles of Hope*, would surmise that every human 'venturing out' implies the

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principle of hope, and that we always live the present moment in a hope-filled future, because the very moment we become reflexive of the present, that present becomes a past and the future sets in incessantly. And we involve in this present, not so much with a 'reason of contemplation,' but with a 'reason of participation,' the very logic of involvements or initiatives. The reason for a Christian to be involved in every present moment with creative initiatives is Christ, the hope-filled Divine presence, who continues relentlessly to create every moment anew. As Hans Küng would put it, it is ultimately the Risen Christ who propels us into transcendence, in and through every creative moment of historical transcending.

Christian existential theologians like Paul Tillich and Schubert Ogden would surmise that theology is a manner of correlating existential questions with Christian Faith in God by way of reflecting about the latter to be decisive to answer the questions. Among the innumerable existential questions, the very reality of being human is the most abiding and substantive question that can be posed and an answer sought in terms of faith. Though our normal circumstances of life do not create a mood or an ambience to reflect over the very reality of being human as the fundamental question to be raised to God, situations such as that which we face today, i.e., the global pandemic of COVID-19, make us go into the deeper roots of our life and raise some fundamental questions constitutive of the very human existence:

What is a loss of life? What is it like to go near the throes of death? What is it like to 'touch death with one's hands?' What is a loss of endearing relationship? What is a loss of human touch? What is a loss of freedom of movement? What is it like to live with extremely limited means of livelihood? What is it like to bid farewell to the world as a lonely creature? What is it like to experience the warmth of dear ones through glass windows? What is it like to see and talk to dear ones virtually?

These are some of the questions which bring to our mind some of the rudiments of being human. One of the tangible ways of answering these questions in terms of faith in God is embarking upon pastorally creative activities, as far as the Christian faith is concerned, to feel the pulsations of life amidst the pandemic condition of life we are in.

## Theological Responses from Asia

While theologizing from the Asian perspective, we need to take into account the reservoir of religious traditions and the thickness of religious faith operative among the Asian people. Though the pandemic lockdown prevented the Asians from practising their religion publicly and in common worship / religious centres, the vitality of faith present among them found avenues in multiple forms, including home-based religious activities (House-Church is a good example for the same). One could argue that prevalence of such thick faith-practices was one important contributory factor to responding to COVID-19 more effectively than some Western countries like Italy, France, Spain, Germany, Belgium, and the UK (Grestenfeld 2020) which are known for their thinness of religion, due to a strong secularisation. This thick faith of Asians needs to be situated within the structural realities of Asia.

Aloysius Pieris (2013), one of the leading Asian theologians, points out that any Asian theology, to be worthy of its name, needs to 'breathe the Asian ethos' characterised by abysmal poverty on the one hand and thick plurality of religions on the other. Along with them, one would also add realities of social (caste, colour, race, etc) and gender discriminations which are markedly Asian by sociological reckoning. In this context of rampant poverty, rich religious diversity, and entrenched oppressive social and gender hierarchies, how may we respond theologically to COVID-19 is therefore the central question to be examined.

Poverty is not anymore mere want of food, shelter, and clothing, though millions suffer even without these basics of livelihood; but it is that which is experienced at the intersections of economic deprivation, social exclusion and indignity, psychological insecurities, cultural marginality, and so on. Economists have, for some time now, begun to assess poverty under a multidimensional poverty index which includes other necessities like education, sanitation, health care, etc. Moreover, it is not hard to realise that poverty as a form of systemic evil is a social making, underwritten by accumulation of wealth in fewer hands by the neo-liberal economic policies, hoarding of basics with commercial profit motives, malfunctioning governance with inadequate infrastructures and corrupt practices, etc. The COVID-19 pandemic hit the poor the worst; they have lost their menial jobs even as migrant labourers, educational facilities, loss of economic securities, and are left to fend for themselves. It is still fresh in the memory that during the early days of the pandemic, after a few weeks of 'sound and fury,' the poor were left to fend for themselves during the successive stages

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of the pandemic. They lost the minimum securities they had managed to gather through decades of hard labour and they have not got them back again, and it will take decades before they come back to the pre-pandemic condition of life.

Responding to this scenario of poverty-stricken vulnerability, theology becomes practical, pursued through activities to be in solidarity with the poor and victims. As far as our churches are concerned, efforts at this solidarity have been pursued through pastoral care at the grassroots. The volume edited by Anthony Le Duc and John Mi Shen (2021) gives a good account of the varieties of creative pastoral responses made in the global context and highlights the fact that a performative pastoral theology was in action during the pandemic. Similar efforts abound in other regions as well. They are a standing witness to the fact that Church at the grassroots does not fail to be involved in practical theologies of forging firm ties with victims during times of catastrophe and pandemic.

Poverty and its intersectional ties with social and gender discriminations can be meaningfully responded to also at the plane of creative theological reflections. Asia is a region of religions, embodying deep wisdom, diverse rituals, life-centred spiritualities, grassroots organised relationships and institutions, and, more pertinently, creative beliefs and practices. Alongside, they also have religious obscurantism, ill-meaning religious beliefs and practices, harbouring region-specific hegemonies, and oppressive powers, etc. While the former set of factors can be brought together in theological conversations, especially in the context of pandemic, the latter set of abusive religious factors could be critically interrogated and weakened.

It is pertinent here to take note of Aloysius Pieris' efforts to make a relationship between poverty and religiosity in the Asian context. Poverty, for him, can be *evangelical poverty*, i.e., greedless living, the practice and teaching about which are found in several Asian religions; and *social poverty*, i.e., the structural evil of poverty (forced to live on limited means), born out of 'institutional greed or globalized mammonolatry' which can be opposed and corrected with resources from Asian religions. Pieris relates these two types of poverty with two types of religiosity: one, a religiosity that encourages evangelical poverty which is liberative, i.e., "liberates one from Greed ... greed which leads to unshared riches and class-divisions;" and the other, a religiosity that encourages social poverty which is enslaving by "associating with the ideology of the upper class" (2013, 88). Pieris goes on to say that "Asian theology we advocate is one that combines *in its praxis* the liberative dimension of both poverty and religiosity and a relentless struggle to reduce their enslaving aspects" (Ibid, 89).

The COVID-19 pandemic, in a way, paved the way for mobilizing spiritual actions in favour of the evangelical / religious poverty. The pandemic, to some extent, has been a neutralizer in that it affected both the poor and the rich with equal force (some would argue that the vulnerability was experienced more by the elites – calling it a ‘disease of the rich!’). While that being the case, the pandemic has induced a sense of detachment from one’s possession, due to the frustrating experience that even the availability of money could not save lives ultimately! In addition, instances are innumerable wherein most intimate people were left unattended by their kith and kin due to the fear of contracting the virus. All these seem to present a sobering effect on the human drive for acquisition, accumulation, and greed. It therefore opens a possibility for cultivating spiritual attitudes and developing spiritual actions which nurture the virtue of evangelical / religious poverty today. Needless to say, such spiritual attitudes and actions, because they would dwell upon learning to live in rather austere manner, will also contribute to learning to live along with nature rather than exploiting it for human comfort and profit.

The pandemic has also made us look for the wisdom of Asian religions to face up to sufferings in the best way possible. Buddhist wisdom on the understanding of suffering is worth recalling here. Among the three modes of suffering (those of physical pain, those due to changes, and those due to ‘conditioning’), it would do well to reflect especially about the last two in our context of pandemic. Suffering due to changes makes us mindful of the impermanence of reality and the imminence of change – from life to death; and suffering due to ‘conditioning’ makes us aware of the susceptibility to suffering at the very next moment of our life – we are so conditioned that we cannot control our future or predict what the future has in store for us. It leaves us with the radical awareness of a certain ‘featurelessness’ (Lopez 2021). This radical ‘this-moment-ness’ makes us compassionate towards oneself and others, as Lopez would surmise. Compassion, as he interprets, is the ardent wish for others not to suffer.

We may also draw insights from the Chinese philosophy of *yin-yang*, according to which life is a rhythm of opposites and paradoxes, which are, ultimately complementary. This philosophy has been guiding the Chinese consciousness for more than two millennia, pervading different walks of life. It tempers the psyche, counselling it in terms of opposite possibilities, treating one as the dialectic of the other. Several folk religious traditions of Asia render this dialectic aesthetically, mythically, and ritually. For example, a female deity from the Indian context, *Kali* by name, can present her terrorising *bhava* (posture) on

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the one hand and motherly protective *bhava* on the other – both as part of the religious experience of the people. Felix Wilfred speaks about these two aspects of divinities as pointing to ‘prophetic anger’ on the one hand and ‘sapiential compassion’ on the other, having profound implications for human conduct:

Whereas prophetic anger points to the human responsibility in perpetrating evil, compassion proceeds from another perspective that goes beyond human culpability. It derives from the conviction that evil is the product of ignorance; or that it is the result of a particular existential situation into which human beings are thrown by circumstances of history. (2010, 174)

During the days of Reformation, Martin Luther spoke of the ‘Left Hand’ and ‘Right Hand’ theology of God, wherein the Left Hand signified the punishing dimension of divinity, while the Right Hand signified love and compassion of God. Luther would go on to comment that when we are under the shadow of God’s Left Hand, we need to sustain our faith in the Right Hand.

The pandemic has given an occasion also to critically look at some of the beliefs systems from the Asian soil which have an enslaving element attached with them. For example, the belief in *Karma* could be critically looked at. It may well be philosophically explained that this belief is the most ‘rational’ of religious beliefs in that it simply portrays a logic which states: ‘to the measure and kind you act, to that measure and kind you reap’ and that ‘every action is followed up with its consequences.’ However, the way this belief is operative among the popular consciousness is towards producing a sense of fatalism, which abdicates human responsibility in the face of suffering. Such beliefs, though they may have their therapeutic effect, go against the grain of a healthy theological response to the pandemic and, therefore, they need to be critically evaluated. Similarly, treating the intersectionality of poverty as an inherited part of karma and allowing oneself to passively suffer is yet another enslaving belief, which needs to be interrogated.

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# **Christ, Cross and COVID-19: Words that Never Die in the New Normal Religious Communication**

*Norman Melchor R. Peña Jr., SSP*

## **Introduction to New Normal Religious Communication under COVID-19**

Authentic religious belief in any culture is often challenged to preserve what has been ascribed to it and also to deal with crises that come. At the height of the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) the House of Congress of the Philippines on April 28, 2020 passed House Bill 6623 – *New Normal for the Workplace and Public Spaces Act of 2020* – which “will prepare and educate the Filipino public for life after the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions and to adapt to the new norms of physical distancing and institutionalizes a new way of life after the ECQ and serves as a guide to the public” (Quoted by Cervantes 2020). The Bill explicitly provides standards that apply to: a) universal safety measures, such as mandatory wearing of masks in public places and social distancing; b) administration and regulation of government managed public spaces and privately managed spaces; c) organization of public transportation; and d) monitoring of schools, learning institutions, and private and industrial workplaces.

How do these current realities and prerequisites of the new normal relate to religious communication? Is there not a seeming counter-culturality between communication of religious faith normally practiced for example by Filipinos through the cultural tradition of “faith, fiesta and food” – gatherings in public Mass attendance, celebration of devotions like the Feast of the *Nazareno*, novenas, block rosaries and charismatic gatherings – and the new normal which

seems to hinder them? What converging affordances in religious communication become evident between the new normal and the Seven Last Words of Christ on the cross?<sup>1</sup> And how would they impact on communication among different religious faiths?

Religious communication in all religious faiths embodies visions of life and is indelibly interconnected. They are bound together and characterized by a set of beliefs and attitudes. The pandemic can be considered a tragedy which John Morell describes as “life full of incongruence [and] discrepancies between the way things ought to be and the way things are.” The same could be said of religious communication in all religious faiths:

In philosophical Hinduism the whole of our ordinary experience is misleading; in reality all that exists is one unchanging Self. Buddhism denies this one unchanging self, but as part of its general denial that any selves exist. In the monotheistic religions, the world of selves and objects is real enough, but there is irony in the values we attach to this world – too often we place more importance on what is fleeting and trivial than on what is genuinely important. Several religious texts have thematic similarities with tragedies. Buddha’s question was the central question in tragedy: how should human beings handle suffering and death? The Biblical story of Job is similar in several ways to that of Oedipus. Jesus’ cry on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”, sounds tragic. (Morrell 1999, 41)

A correlative resonance exists between the experience of religious communication in the new normal forced by the COVID-19 pandemic and each of the Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross. The Words become the new normal and guiding beacons to how religious communication can be effectuated during the pandemic. For Pope Francis they herald a compass of hope in life and in God (Gomes 2021) and entrustment to Him who is ultimately the Alpha and the Omega – the first and the last Word of creation. Applying an interdisciplinary exploratory method from the biblical, philosophical, psychological and communication fields, this study begins by defining the global

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<sup>1</sup> This study utilizes the definition of AFFORDANCE by Meriam-Webster which considers it as, “the quality or property of an object that defines its possible uses or makes clear how it can or should be used. See “Affordance.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/affordance> on October 2, 2020. Throughout the study references to the citations of the Seven Last Words are capitalized.

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challenge and death brought by COVID-19 which has become the new arena of communication representing the reality of Christ's Last Words on the Cross. These Words never die but continue to live inspiring a seven-fold praxis of hope:

1. **Entreaty** - Invocation (“*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*” – Lk 23:33-34);
2. **Disclosure** - Accompaniment (“*Today, you will be with me in paradise.*” – Lk 23:39-43);
3. **Relationship** - Encounter (“*Woman, behold thy son. Son, behold thy mother.*” – Jn 19:25-27);
4. **Isolation** - Human Frailty (“*Father, why have you forsaken me.*” – Mt 27:45-46);
5. **Exigency** - Needs (“*I thirst.*” – Jn 19:28-29),
6. **Fulfillment** - Healing (“*It is finished.*” – Jn 19:30); and,
7. **Entrustment** – Identity (“*Into your hands I commend my spirit.*” – Lk 23:44-46).

Each of these relates with narrative experiences during the pandemic where all are invited not only to approach communication as a transmitted process, characterized by effectivity and feedback from sender intent, but to understand it as semiotics where newfound meanings and significance are embedded, and effort is exerted to seek and understand the truth in what each interactant expresses. Here communication succeeds more as it encourages both sender and receiver to engage and examine in the significance of the message for each of them. Other than a process, God's communication can also be considered semiotically. It seeks what is best for persons as recipients and centers on how they could grow not only in faith but likewise as human beings who bear God's image and likeness.

### **Etymology of the *New Normal***

The concept of *the new normal* is neither something ‘new’ nor an outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like social media communication, the phrase *new normal* can be considered as a “product of evolution rather than a revolution” (Coyle and Vaughn 2008, 2, 13). Such phrase made a common appearance during the

post-World War I in 1918 in several books and articles. Among these was Henry Wise Wood's article, "Beware!":

To consider the problems before us we must divide our epoch into three periods, that of **war**, that of **transition**, that of the **new normal**, which undoubtedly will supersede the old. The questions before us, therefore, are, broadly, two: How shall we pass from war to the new normal with the least jar, in the shortest time? In that respect should **the new normal** be shaped to differ from the old?

Some contend that we should first envisage **the new normal** and carve the measures of transition to suit its requirements. Others believe that we should cautiously feel our way through the period of transition and arrive at what **the new normal** shall be by the road of experience. The first would attempt reconstruction by synthetic process; the second would achieve it by natural growth. Who shall say that a new normal, artificially compounded at this distance from the future, will work? Who shall say that a new normal, patiently sought through trial and error, will not work? (Wood 1918)

At the outset, the *new normal* was part of the stages of transition that necessitated adaptation. At this stage of transition there was less certainty. Resilience was its primary affordance.

Within the sphere of religious communication, *The Christian Advocate* in 1921 published this: "Let the Church loose itself from the destroying meshes of the old normal and set itself resolutely and with unshakable faith for the real tasks of the present day. It is the new normal, then, that beckons the Church of God" (66). The "task of the present day" implies the affordance of existential faith – applying the old normal to current challenges and necessities.

The new normal affordance of freedom was illustrated by Robert A. Heinlein in his 1966 novel, *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*, citing: "Citizens, requests may reach you through your comrade neighbors. I hope you will comply willingly; it will speed the day when I can bow out and life can get back to normal — a **new normal**, free of the Authority, free of guards, free of troops stationed on us, free of passports and searches and arbitrary arrests" (152). The end of freedom points to life going back to the normal.

In the past ten to fifteen years, the 'new normal' occurred often with the affordance of a new standard rooted in expectation or experience. This was

highlighted in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks with book titles such as: *The New Normal: How FDNY Firefighters Are Rising to the Challenge of Life After September 11* (2002), *Assessing the New Normal: Liberty and Security for the Post–September 11 United States* (January 30, 2003), *After 911 in the 'New' Normal: Who Are We? Why Are We Here? Where Are Going?* (February 1, 2003), and *The New Normal: Living a Fear-Free Life in a Fear-Driven World* (2005).<sup>2</sup> They underline a hope for the future.

Other writers persisted in highlighting the belief in novelty rather than conventionality of the phrase. In her foreword to John Putzier's book *Weirdos in the Workplace: The New Normal - Thriving in the Age of the Individual*, Libby Sartain (2004) claims that the phrase "the new normal" is a recent coinage. In the same year Roger McNamee writes that "the new normal is a time of substantial possibilities if you are willing to play by the new rules for the long term. In the new normal it is more important to do things right than to succumb to the tyranny of urgency" (Quoted by Leusen 2020). Fundamentally, McNamee highlights the correlation of the new normal with the demands of the economy to which most countries are not immune. Here, one can mention China's economy which in recent years has shown a marked slowdown, with decreased growth rates from double digit levels (before the 2007-2009 financial crisis) to around 7 percent in 2014. In that year, Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, indicated that China was entering a "new normal" (Chinese: 新常态) (United Nations ESCAP 2015). The economic association with the term was subsequently popularized by the press and came to refer to expectations of more stable economic growth and medium-to-long term economic growth rates in China and elsewhere for the future.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the term new normal has referred to human behavior changes in which people have been asked to embrace with additional affordances. These include limited contact between persons, social distancing, diminished handshakes and hugs. In addition, the new situation is also characterized by asynchronous and synchronous flexible learning including utilization of learning management systems, emergences of new commercial strategies, and sharing and witnessing of religious belief as a way of continuing mission and evangelization.

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<sup>2</sup> To these I add the book I published: *Tragedy and Religious Identity in Social Media: A case study of the textual narrative responses to the YouTube "September 11 2001 Video"* (Rome: Pontifical Salesian University, 2015).

### The Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross

The Seven Last Words of Christ have always been part of the Holy Week celebration in Christian Churches around the world. They pertain to the Words which Christ communicated before his death on the cross as narrated in the first four books of the New Testament of the Christian Scripture popularly known as the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. No general agreement is made about the chronology and order of utterance of the Seven Words, given that the authors of the New Testament did not make a complete record of them all. Table 1 highlights the traditional sequence of the Seven Words showing their citations across the Gospels with corresponding and emerging elements of religious communication inherent therein. The Words are divided in each of the Gospels with *Luke* communicating the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> Words, *Matthew* and *Mark* the 4<sup>th</sup> Word, and *John* the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> Words.

<b>Table 1:</b> Citations of the Seven Last Words Across the Gospel					
<b>Seven Words</b>	<b>Matthew</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Luke</b>	<b>John</b>	<b>Religious Communication</b>
1. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."			Lk 23:33-37		Entreaty
2. "Today, you will be with me in paradise."			Lk 23:39-43		Disclosure
3. "Woman, behold thy son. Son, behold thy mother."				Jn 19:25-27	Relationship
4. " <i>Eli, Eli, lama sabach-thani?</i> " (My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.)	Mt 27:45-46	Mark 15:34			Isolation

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5. "I thirst."				Jn 19:28- 29	Exigency
6. "It is finished."				Jn 19:30	Fulfillment
7. "Into your hands I commend my spirit."			Lk 23:44- 46		Entrustment

Each of the Seven communicates a narrative reality of human experience similarly prevalent in the post pandemic times. Tacit agenda themes that anchor on a sevenfold praxis of hope for new normal religious communication can be deduced from each of the Words: *entreaty* - invocation (1<sup>st</sup> word), *disclosure* - accompaniment (2<sup>nd</sup> word), *relationship* – encounter (3<sup>rd</sup> word), *isolation* – human frailty (4<sup>th</sup> word), *exigency* - needs (5<sup>th</sup> word), *fulfilment* - healing (6<sup>th</sup> word), and *entrustment* - identity (7<sup>th</sup> word). They are discussed in the following:

### 1<sup>st</sup> Word (Entreaty): "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." – (Lk 23:33-37)

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "**Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.**" And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"<sup>3</sup>

The 1<sup>st</sup> Word is recorded only by Luke. He is described by scholars as an expert in communicating narrative details of events. In the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> Words of Christ on the cross, Luke communicates a unitary link in the identity

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<sup>3</sup> Bible references are all taken from the *New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition* (NRSVCE). Accessed <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Revised-Standard-Version-NRSV-Bible/> on 1 September 2021.

of Christ who harmonizes himself with God and humanity: “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do” (v. 34). Here Christ invokes the mercy of God for the people who in crucifying him, “do not know what they are doing.” The importance of entreaty in religious communication emerges from the prayer for mercy for the people. This invocation demonstrates the dual etymological concept of mercy – *רחמים* (*rahamin*) and *חסד* (*hesed*). *רחמים* is synonymous with tender compassion<sup>4</sup> and often induces peripheral acts or resources that can alleviate a felt need of human nourishment. It is noteworthy that Christ, who himself needs alleviation from the felt pain of the cross, makes an invocation of mercy for the people. More than *רחמים* what Christ has communicated is *חסד*, the second etymological meaning of mercy. *חסד* refers to covenantal love, steadfast loyalty, commitment or promise (Payes 2018). Christ’s invocation of mercy carries an awareness of commitment and steadfast loyalty to his identity as a primary communicator of God’s covenantal love. Religious communication in the new normal challenges persons to go beyond peripheral communication which focuses only on transmitting acts and resources of kindness to rooting such acts in commitment to one’s identity as children of God.

Mercy in its dual etymological significance is embodied during the COVID-19 pandemic in the reality of the renowned *Maginhawa Community Pantry* initiative in the Philippines, which started on April 20, 2021. Its 26-year-old founder, Ana Patricia Non, emphasizes its goal which she epitomizes in the slogan: *Kumuha ayon sa pangangailangan. Magbigay ayon sa kakayahan*’ (Get according to your needs. Give according to your capacity).<sup>5</sup> It is a localized representation of the international “mutual aid” that embeds the dual meaning of mercy as tender compassion as well as authentic commitment. Currently there are more than 3,000 offshoot community pantries spread throughout the country.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Word Internet Bible College, *God’s Mercy, Longsuffering, Patience and Sympathy*. Accessed [http://internetbiblecollege.net/tWIBC/Subjects-01-10/Subject-01/Gods%20Mercy,%20Longsuffering,%20Patience %20And%20Sympathy.htm](http://internetbiblecollege.net/tWIBC/Subjects-01-10/Subject-01/Gods%20Mercy,%20Longsuffering,%20Patience%20And%20Sympathy.htm) on September 30, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Ana Patricia Non is a graduate of UP College of Fine Arts (Philippines), and an entrepreneur running a small furniture making shop whose operations stopped due to the pandemic. Before the pandemic she has been a volunteer and organizer of activities to help the poor. A brief overview of Non is found in Joseph Pedrajas, “Who is Patricia Non, the woman who sparked kindness through the Maginhawa community pantry?” in *Manila Bulletin*. Accessed <https://mb.com.ph/2021/05/06/who-is-patricia-non-the-woman-who-sparked-kindness-through-the-maginhawa-community-pantry/> on September 30, 2021.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Word (Disclosure): “Today, you will be with me in paradise.” – (Lk 23:39-43)**

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, **“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”** He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Word, also from Luke, takes off where the 1<sup>st</sup> has left. With Christ on the cross are two criminals. One of them continues to mock Christ while the other, rebuking his fellow criminal, makes a dual affirmative disclosure of identity: 1) *Themselves*, being, “under the same sentence of condemnation” (v.40); and, 2) *Christ*, saying that “this man [Christ] has done nothing wrong” (v.41). Disclosure requires an honest affirmation of identity, either that of oneself and others. The philosopher Martin Buber (1958) considers this disclosure as a manifestation of the *I-thou*.

The attitude of man is twofold, in accordance with the twofold nature of the primary words which he speaks. The primary words are not isolated words, but combined words. The one primary word is the combination I-Thou. The other primary word is the I-It; wherein, without a change of the primary word, one of the words He and She can replace It. Hence the I of man is twofold. For the I of the primary word I-Thou is a different I from that of the primary word I-It.

Primary words do not signify things, but they intimate relations. Primary words do not describe something that might exist independently of them, but being spoken they bring about existence. Primary words are spoken from the being. If Thou is said, the I of the combination I-Thou is said along with it. If It is said, the I of the combination I-It is said along with it. The primary word I-Thou can only be spoken with the whole being. The primary word I-It can never be spoken with the whole being.

Analyzing Buber, Michael Zank believes that this revelation “is a model of existence... a revelation of ‘presence’” (*Gegenwart*). In contrast to ‘object’ (*Gegenstand*), the presence revealed by revelation as encounter occupies the space ‘in between’ the subject and the other (a tree, a person, a work of art, God). This ‘in between’ space is defined as ‘mutual’ (*gegenseitig*)” (Zank and Braiterman 2021). In the disclosure of Christ and the criminal who defends him, there is a felt mutual exchange of presence. This felt and mutual presence empowers the latter to make his request: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (v.42). It is a religious communication of his belief in Christ and his kingdom where solace abounds. Acknowledging this presence within himself, Christ responds and affirms: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (v.43). It is worth noting that a criminal, who represents an imperfect instrument of communication, is to be with Christ in Paradise. The apparent imperfection of the instrument of communication is strengthened by the truth of the message that Christ on his part carries and embodies. Religious communication in the new normal invites persons to live and share the same experience. Despite human imperfection, persons are invited to a more authentic disclosure accompanied by a felt *Gegenwart* (presence) and one that is *gegenseitig* (mutual).

The felt presence of the frontliners in the fight against COVID-19 is an excellent exemplification of communication that transmits an authentic encounter. That many frontliners have also died in the hope of saving lives testifies to the true religious communication in the post pandemic time. Experience of sickness as a sign of physical limitation will always certainly be present, yet the representation of authentic service and commitment of many frontliners despite the hardships and risks, offer inspiration and hope.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Word (Relationship): “Woman, behold thy son. Son, behold thy mother.” – (Jn 19:25-27)**

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, **“Woman, here is your son.”** Then he said to the disciple, **“Here is your mother.”** And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

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Whereas the Gospel according to Luke is known for its narrative details, the Gospel according to John is known for the depth and intimacy of its narrative conversations. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Word is an example of this narrative conversation: “Woman, here is your son. [Disciple] here is your mother” (v.26-27). John precludes it with the predicate “mother and disciple whom he loved” (v.26) which hints of a close relationship. The dismal situation narrated by Luke with Christ’s mother, with Mary, the wife of Clopas, and with Mary Magdalene standing near the cross of Jesus (cf v.25) converges with the equally dismal COVID-19 crisis that has been wreaking havoc in the world for so long. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Word invites persons to open their minds and hearts to new yet equally profound and sound ways of relational encounter not based on blood or usual conventions. The relationship summoned by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Word explicates the encounter advocated by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Word.

Pope Francis hints on this in the 48<sup>th</sup> World Day of Communications Message in 2014. He mentions the positive effect of connections brought by the digital communication, but pointed to their ultimate end as creating authentic relationship and encounter. He affirms:

It is not enough to be passersby on the digital highways, simply “connected”; connections need to grow into true encounters. We cannot live apart, closed in on ourselves. We need to love and to be loved. We need tenderness. Media strategies do not ensure beauty, goodness and truth in communication. The world of media also has to be concerned with humanity; it too is called to show tenderness. The digital world can be an environment rich in humanity; a network not of wires but of people. The impartiality of media is merely an appearance; only those who go out of themselves in their communication can become a true point of reference for others. Personal engagement is the basis of the trustworthiness of a communicator. Christian witness, thanks to the internet, can thereby reach the peripheries of human existence.

Religious communication in the new normal works for the creation of not only connections but also authentic relationships. In line with this aim, Pope Francis calls for the deepening of the concept of neighbor through a rediscovery and practice of neighborliness:

Those who communicate, in effect, become neighbors...Jesus shifts our understanding: it is not just about seeing the other as someone like myself, but of the ability to make myself like the other. Communication is really about realizing that we are all human beings, children of God. I like seeing this power of communication as “neighborliness”. (Ibid.)

Communication in the new normal as highlighting authentic relationship and creating neighborliness is well symbolized by the Italian words used interchangeable for neighbor: *vicino* (near) and/or *prossimo* (neighborliness). It can be a worthwhile theme for further study how these concepts are applied in different countries. However, in the context of the Philippines, one word is used to describe the distinction of both through their pronunciation. The word is *malapit*. Pronounced unaccented as *malapit* it means near, referring to proximity. Accented as *malapít*, it carries the deeper significance of concern for the other and being one at heart. Bearing in mind the 3<sup>rd</sup> Word of Christ on the cross, religious communication in the new normal invites persons to deepen their relationship and go beyond proximity to real concern for others be they close relatives or not.

#### 4<sup>th</sup> Word (Isolation): “Father, why have you forsaken me.” – (Mt 27:45-46)

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, “**Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?**” that is, “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**” When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “This man is calling for Elijah.” At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.

The dependency of Matthew on Mark explains why the 4<sup>th</sup> Word appears almost identical in both Gospels. Christ cries from the cross in despair for his felt abandonment by God: “*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*” (v.46). Reflective of Psalm 22:1 (*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me so far from my cries of anguish?*), the Words of the middle utterance of Christ presents

a stark contrast to the 1<sup>st</sup> Word of entreaty wherein he asks the Father to forgive the people of their misdeeds. It is a paradox between absolution and abandonment, trust and inquiry, and identity and doubt. Here the feeling of security and certainty seem no longer sustainable as the weight and pain of the cross overcomes Christ's body and echoes isolation, human frailty, and weakness. It is a painful encounter with God, a cry of human pain where He is mostly sought.

COVID-19 experiences of death and isolation manifest such pain. There have been instances when loved ones are taken by relatives to hospitals in the Philippines, and after some days and a large amount of hospital expenses incurred, they are taken back home already in ashes being declared as COVID-19 positive. Sadly, for the many Filipinos who are poor, this has become a common narrative. The 4<sup>th</sup> Word, however, challenges persons to transform the death that comes. Not that the dead are brought back to life, but that their passing away becomes easier to bear for their families. For Philip Goble Jr. the cry of abandonment in an inescapable and impending death is a cry of dereliction. It is a cry from the cross, “spoken in front of those surrounding Christ's execution as a final plea for repentance to those who opposed him and, simultaneously, as Words of comfort to his followers” (2021, 19).<sup>6</sup> Religious communication in the new normal is clothed with the stigma of isolation and human frailty yet continues to live in the heart that beats a treasured value of hope. By his death Christ has enabled persons to recognize the grace to never be forgotten by God.

### **5<sup>th</sup> Word (Exigency): “I thirst” – (Jn 19:28-29)**

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), **“I am thirsty.”** A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Word from John, “I thirst” (also same as “I am thirsty”) can be interpreted as an extension of the “I am” sayings of Christ. To mention a few: “I am the Good Shepherd” (Jn 10-11), “I am the Light of the World” (Jn 8:12),

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<sup>6</sup> Goble makes four foundational precepts in this regard: 1) Christ's purpose of being on earth and His understanding of that purpose; 2) the relationship between Jesus and the Father; 3) an understanding that Christ had the power to choose His path; and 4) the physical toll that Jesus' scourging and crucifixion had on his human body, 2.

“I am the Bread of Life” (Jn 6:35). Together they refer to an awareness of identity and response to a need – the Shepherd who looks after the need of the sheep, the world in need of light, and the persons who need nourishment. Shortest among the Seven Last Words, the 5<sup>th</sup> Word communicates a longing satisfaction to a physical need, thirst (v.28). It too rekindles Christ’s conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well asking her of water to drink (Jn 4:1-30). Reference to Christ “knowing all was now finished and to fulfill scripture” (v.28) is found in a prophecy in Psalm 22:15: “My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death.” Christ’s actions done in fulfillment of scripture highlight the plan of God for the lives of people.

Awareness of identity and response to a need refers one back to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs which he presented as part of his work on “Theory of Human Motivation”. It is comprised of **basic needs** (physiological and safety – food, water, warmth rest, security and safety), **psychological needs** (belonging, love and esteem – intimacy, friends, prestige and feeling of accomplishment) and **self-fulfillment needs** (self-actualization – achieving one’s full potential including creative activities) (1943, 370-396). In 1998, Maslow added self-transcendence to self-actualization. He defined it as “connecting to something beyond the ego or to help others find self-fulfillment and realize their potential” (Quoted by Huitt 2007).

Religious communication in the new normal champions awareness of identity and responds to fulfill the hierarchy of needs. The 5<sup>th</sup> Word literally fulfills Christ’s need; narrating that at his declaration of thirst, persons “put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth” (v.29). The concept of the Greek τέλειος – *téleios* (fulfillment - perfection) in this instance is significant. It becomes an excellent but difficult goal to attain since human beings cannot be without weakness, limitation, or needs. A more plausible attitude is believing that a person can be complete or mature even though he/she carries limitations. A well-known adage confirms this: “It is much easier to be mature and still have flaws, rather than be without flaws. Many are mature, but few if any are without flaw.”

The directives in following the various levels of quarantine and their frequency imposed in the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic are examples of strategies that are developing and are not without its own limitations and flaws. Most Filipinos abide by them mindful of the good they can do as a response to the need to be safe and healthy and their representation. Religious communication is also not without its flaws, needs, and limitations.

Attentive to and abiding by official mandates, religious communication encourages authentic help that can fulfill the needs of people and remain safe from COVID-19.

### 6<sup>th</sup> Word (Fulfilment): “It is finished” – (Jn 19:30)

When Jesus had received the wine, he said, **“It is finished.”** Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Christ’s 6<sup>th</sup> Word, τετέλεσται – “It is finished” (v.30), is considered open to interpretation for its referent seems unclear at first glimpse. The indicative passive and perfect tense derivative of word τέλειος – *téleios* (maturity or perfection) which is scantily discussed previously in the 5<sup>th</sup> Word, τετέλεσται means to end; bring to completion and conclusion; complete; accomplish; fulfill; or finish. Scholars believe that anyone or anything that has reached τέλειος – *téleios* has arrived at completion, maturity, or perfection. They also point out that Christ’s use of the perfect tense is most significant as it refers to an action made yet continues so that when one action finishes a new one begins:

The perfect tense is a combination of two Greek tenses: the Present tense, and the Aorist tense. The Aorist tense is punctiliar: meaning something that happens at a specific point in time; a moment. The Present tense is linear: meaning something that continues and has ongoing results/implications.<sup>7</sup>

The two senses combined are important because when Christ says, “It is finished,” what he is actually saying is “It is finished and will continue to be finished.” The 6<sup>th</sup> Word therefore signals not a closing or termination. Rather, it opens a door to a new stage of relationship, a turning point when one continues to strain forward towards healing and growth. Rick Renner (2021), a Greek New Testament scholar, hints on this: “[Christ] bore our griefs. He carried our sorrows. He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. He was chastised for our peace. He was scourged for our healing.”

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<sup>7</sup> Among the scholars are those from Columbia International University. See *It is Finished! (A Look at the Greek)*. Accessed <https://www.ciu.edu/content/it-finished-look-greek> on October 1, 2021. Simply explained the “perfect tense” concept is like high school students, who in graduating say goodbye to their old school and say hello to a new college school.

Fulfillment and integrality are exemplified in the world's struggle to bring healing and combat death and ill effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has begun with the observance of health protocols, the numerous lockdowns and its diverse restrictive classifications, disruption of religious and social life and activities, shift to flexible learning modes of education and suspension of face-to-face (F2F) classes at various levels, production and distribution of vaccines, mutual aid from people similar to community pantries, and prayers of hope and healing from God. Recognizing all these, religious communication in the new normal must be rooted in the perfect tense that recognizes the reality of imperfect communication yet strains towards the τέλειος – *téleios*, towards healing, maturity and growth.

**7<sup>th</sup> Word (Entrustment): “Into your hands I commend my spirit” – (Lk 23:44-46)**

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, **“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”** Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this man was innocent.”

The 7<sup>th</sup> Word parallels the 1<sup>st</sup> Word in its reference to the ‘Father’ and can also be considered as part of an entreaty. Recognizing that everything is finished and that he has done what is asked of him to which he has shown commitment, Christ entrusts himself to God. It is an entrustment of someone who is very much aware of his identity in relationship with God. To God, Christ commends (συνιστάω, *synistaō*) his spirit (v.46). Bible Concordances translate συνιστάω, *synistaō* with commend or entrust associating it with, “set together, i.e., (by implication) to introduce (favorably), or (figuratively) to exhibit; intransitively, to stand near, or (figuratively) to constitute.”<sup>8</sup> It is synonymous with commit,

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<sup>8</sup> See Strong's Concordance, Greek Dictionary (συνιστάω, *synistaō* G4921). Accessed <https://www.quotescosmos.com/bible/bible-concordance/G4921.html> on October 3, 2021. Among the biblical texts citing συνιστάω are in the Epistles of Paul, eg. Rom 3:5, Rom 5:8, 2 Cor. 3:1, 2 Cor 4:2, 2 Cor 5:12, and 2 Cor 10:18. As a transitive verb, it is defined as, “entrust for care or preservation, recommend as worthy of confidence or notice, and mention with approbation”. See Merriam-Webster online Dictionary. Accessed <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/commend> on October 4, 2021.

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confide, consign, delegate, deliver, entrust, give, give over, hand, hand over, leave, pass, recommend, repose, transfer, transmit, and trust.

Unique in the 7<sup>th</sup> Word scene are: the “darkness that came over the whole land” (v.44), the “sun’s light failed” (v.45), and the “curtains of the temple torn in two” (v.45). They are indicative of an unpleasant narrative event that has occurred. Amid these is Christ’s loud cry of entrustment, “Father, into your hand I commend my spirit” (v.46) that becomes a kaleidoscope of hope enabling constructive victory to be gazed – “when the centurion saw, he praised God and said: ‘certainly this man is innocent’” (v.47). The 7<sup>th</sup> Word is a stark contrast to the 4<sup>th</sup> Word where Christ utters words of being abandoned and forsaken. In the 7<sup>th</sup> Word, the felt presence discussed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Word earlier becomes alive anew and this time referring itself to the ‘Father,’ the God who always loves – Alpha and Omega – the ultimate and Word who never dies and is always trustworthy.

Religious communication in the new normal reminds person what and whom to trust and how to communicate such trust. Authentic trust is built on an authentic relationship which is what Jesus has with the ‘Father.’ It communicates a felt presence that nourishes and inspires. The emergence and spread of and uproar against *Fake News* during pre- and post-pandemic represent the continued narrative reality of ‘good and bad’ in media communication. In the Philippines, there is frequent circulation of contrasting information regarding the conspiracy theories underlying COVID-19, the benefit of being vaccinated, which vaccine is best, political hoarding of vaccines and *ayuda* (material aid to needy persons during lockdowns), billion dollar deals on face masks, changing policies on lockdown classifications, limited percent of Church attendance, and the counter-culturality of the pandemic to the religious tradition. In all these, the transmission of trust and confidence in God becomes the undying panacea and the Words of Christ that brings out goodness in each person and assures longevity until the end of days.

### **Sevenfold Praxis of Hope in Religious Communication**

The cross during COVID-19 pandemic becomes the new arena of religious communication awaiting hope. Praxes of this hope emerge in the current study founded on the correlational affordance between the Seven Last Words of Christ on the cross and the post pandemic narrative experiences, approaches and strategies in dealing with the reality of COVID-19.

1. **Entreaty** involves invocation that roots in greater ownership of selves and dialogue. In religious communication, this should be holistic and integral – heart, mind and will. Christ acknowledges a double identity in his 1<sup>st</sup> Word: *God and Self* (Christ identifies the Father and their relationship) and the *Other* (invocation for those who “know not what they do”). Acknowledgement of identity is a key to a successful dialogue and invocation. During the post-pandemic period, entreaty necessitates recognition of identity of the interactants and a sincere commitment to preserve its integrality which would aid in dialogue.

2. **Disclosure** comes with accompaniment. It exudes a symbolic presence of ‘paradise’ (2<sup>nd</sup> Word) that nourishes and shares in the journey of life. Religious communication in the new normal allows persons to act and express their sorrows and joys and successes and failures. This is the experience narrated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Word. In the new normal, persons are invited evermore to communicate, interact and strain forward armed with a network of limitations but equally with an embodied promise network of hope.

3. **Relationship** is always an encounter. It is created and defined anew in the religious communication of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Word. It goes beyond linkages of blood and can win over the daily battles in life. In the light of tragedy of the cross and COVID-19, religious communication can be considered as an expression of felt experience and presence that portrays what it is to be human and the often contrasting and extreme emotion that comes with it – sadness and joy, hope and despair, hate and love.

4. **Isolation** in communication is often a result of human frailty which can be considered as noise and barriers in process communication. Isolation is a deafening noise alongside being forsaken. Felt presence in religious communication during the pandemic is the panacea for the noise of isolation. It transmits strength amid weakness. The pandemic evokes despair, isolation, and death. Religious communication is equal to hope and to God’s felt presence as Emmanuel.

5. **Exigency** is described as awareness of needs. Like entreaty in the 1<sup>st</sup> Word, it includes awareness of identity and response to a need that longs for satisfaction. All persons have needs and every representation and

satisfaction of a need is communication. Religious communication in the post-pandemic period encourages interactants from highlighting and living communication as process (mainly focusing on transmission and feedback of information) to valuing and living communication as semiotics (empowering through the construction and exchange of meanings). Truth reveals itself in the construction of meaning. It respects individuality and needs and leads to a greater realization of one's potential.

6. **Fulfillment** associates itself with healing and integrality. To many, life with God brings fulfillment. Religious communication strains forward towards this fulfillment through integrality and healing. It is not limited solely to religious terms (grace, sin, God, Christ) but open to the foundational significance of such terms (goodness, love, forgiveness). They express religious identity 'in other words.' While they have a role to play in the construction of religious identity, religious communication can also play a role in its deconstruction. Here the role of negotiation is vital. Fulfillment reveals a need for greater vigilance towards acceptance, rejection, reconfiguration, and innovation in religious communication.

7. **Entrustment** is an affirmation of identity. An interplay of identities is presented in the Seven Last Words and the 7<sup>th</sup> Word shapes them all as one. Responsibility is part of such shaping. In the new normal religious communication, authentic responsibility ensues one's narration of self, in a sort of evolution illustrated with the transformation of the common concepts of *homo sapiens* to *homo technologicus*. Religious communication in the new normal encourages further studies of this transformation to becoming truly *homo Dei*. It provides people with the capacity and opportunity to become people of God. Here God becomes the pandemic hero present amid conflict and suffering. He invites people to a response that affirms or reaffirms their identities in relationship with Him.

## Conclusion

To conclude, it is important to highlight the question of counter-culturality brought about by COVID-19 and its disruption of the communication of religious faith, particularly the Filipino religious traditions, made at the start of this study. Here the distinction between the religious communication of faith as

belief (creed) and religious communication of the expression of faith (rituals) becomes pertinent. Both are part of the dimensions of religiosity that complement one another. Faith as encountered and lived will always be paramount in religious communication during the pandemic. While belief can be enriched and nourished too by the expression of faith, the latter must be guided by the former and not vice versa. The communication of religious tradition should not only be limited to rituals. Rather, these rituals should be guided by our religious creed. Rituals can never be the sole norm of faith. Rituals attain their significance if they are based on creed. These can be best communicated in the age-old Christian dictum: “Love God with all your heart and love your neighbor like yourself” (Lk 10:27) that can be a good measure for the communication of Filipino religious devotions and thus part of the new normal. “Loving our neighbor as ourselves” becomes a great miracle where healing can begin and where communication of religious identity can be best understood. The sevenfold praxis of hope in religious communication bears witness to this.

Second, the converging affordances from the Seven Last Word of Christ on the cross and COVID-19 demonstrate that religious communication is very much a part of God and part of his created world. Religious communication in the new normal strongly affirms God’s relationship with creation and the realities and events. In tragic events like the COVID-19 pandemic, religious communication offers and invites persons to a new perspective and attitude. It allows those in situations of isolation to deepen relationships acknowledging personal limitations and trust. It is an invitation to an entreaty and encounter that strains forward chained within a network of limitation but equally armed within an embodied network of hope. The pandemic comes as an event awaiting hope and entrustment. Here God is always the communication hero who champions it. He is present and invites people to a response that affirms and reaffirms the human spirit clothed with the image and likeness that is His very own.

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# **The Search for Meaning and Values in the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond: Paradigm Shifts in Communicating the Joy of the Gospel**

*Christina Kheng*

## **The Present Missionary Challenge**

The COVID-19 pandemic has turned out to be a prolonged and evolving crisis. In countries which are facing widespread loss of lives and livelihoods with no clear end in sight, people are grieving, fearful, and desolate. Even where the crisis seems more contained, there are feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and fatigue. Around the world the virus strikes in unpredictable waves, plunging more people into poverty, sowing social discord, and creating mental health stresses among both young and old. Moreover, the pandemic is juxtaposed against other crises such as climate change as well as military, political, and social turmoil in countries such as Myanmar, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and other parts of the world. In these challenging times, people search desperately not only for physical security but also for a sense of meaning and direction by which they can navigate their lives. Both the social sciences and religious traditions converge on the fact that human beings have an innate desire for a meaningful life and an enduring purpose. This is especially so when major decisions have to be made or when suffering raises more questions than answers. In such times, the human will to carry on can grow weary. At the societal level, the pandemic and other crises require communities to confront questions about truth, values, and the common good so as to renegotiate social norms. A new epoch heralded by digital technology also raises questions at the philosophical level about human identity, autonomy, ethics, and social relationships.

In such a critical moment of history, religious traditions have an extraordinary opportunity to contribute more to society. The wisdom of religious traditions brings much to bear on the questions of the present time, which can be viewed as a profound occasion for humanity to re-examine its current path and choose a way that better accords with goodness and truth. This entails more than just carrying out the most efficacious and practical course of action. Rather, it requires an interior clarification of foundational values in both mind and heart, leading towards a common vision of what is real, true, and good. For the Catholic Church, facilitating such an interior change might be said to be its most pressing missionary imperative in the present time. Admittedly, some local church communities might have been preoccupied with sustaining their own liturgical activities during the pandemic or even with distributing provisions to the poor. Necessary and important as these might be, the life and mission of the Church is much more. As a “sign and instrument of intimate union with God and the unity of the whole human race,” the Church is to be a living witness of the love of God for the transformation of the world (*Lumen Gentium* - LG, no. 1). However, in order to fulfil this mission more effectively, several paradigm shifts are needed in the Church’s way of proceeding. The following sections discuss each of these.

### **From Preaching to Promoting a Journey of Enquiring Together**

The Church’s approach in witnessing, whether in word or deed, has tended to be didactical in nature. The role which it assumes is that of teacher, preacher, and bearer of truth. For instance, social action ministries aim to give prophetic witness through their works for the poor and their advocacy for justice. Likewise social communications ministries create materials or platforms to proclaim the Good News, whether in physical in-person settings, print, or digital form. Whilst the Church is indeed a proclaimer of the Gospel, the present times call for a new way of witnessing that involves more of *enquiring together*. This goes even further than dialogue because while dialogue is a mutual exchange of perspectives and knowledge, the process of enquiring together is one in which both sides have more questions than answers. This is especially the case during these unprecedented times. In the prolonged crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, pastors have been hard-pressed to provide satisfactory answers to people’s anguished questions about suffering and God’s will. In fact, many pastors are themselves experiencing similar losses and carrying the same

anguished questions in their hearts. At the societal level, the devastating impact on lives and livelihoods, as well as the complex interlace of trade-offs, also admit no easy and straight-forward solution. Beyond the pandemic, new realities such as the fast-developing digital age and radical changes in ecological conditions give rise to questions that no one can immediately answer. Concurrently, the Church is beset by many problems of its own such as clericalism, internal divisions, financial scandals, sexual abuse, dwindling participation, and in some places, diminishing influence of its voice in society amidst rising skepticism and secularism.

In such a context, communication of truth has less traction when it comes from an allegedly all-knowing pulpit. Rather, these times call for a willingness to come down from one's assumed higher ground or greater knowledge and join with people in seeking, asking, learning, and even lamenting. This is a stance of radical humility and vulnerability. It accords with a synodal path of walking together with people along the same journey. In fact, the consolation of such solidarity might give more efficacious witness to the God who walks with us. It echoes Jesus Christ who cries out on the cross with all suffering humanity, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Matthew 27:46).

Pope Francis (2015) has remarked that "a synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening is more than simply hearing. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn." It might be added that the crux of such mutual listening is perhaps not so much about the exchange of knowledge but about the experience of the process in itself and the transformation it engenders. For although many answers have already been proffered through mass media with regard to philosophical, theological, and psycho-emotional questions about the pandemic, people are still asking, seeking, and lamenting. Perhaps this is because it is not just knowledge that they yearn for but compassionate accompaniment through a shared journey, in which a newfound sense of unity might arise from the mutual enquiring, learning, and healing.

### **From Maintenance to Missionary Outreach**

The second shift needed is in terms of the Church's prioritization of its attention and energies. The COVID-19 pandemic has no doubt disrupted the liturgical, sacramental, and communal life of the Church all over the world. Many ecclesial communities have been justifiably pre-occupied with putting safe-distancing

measures in place or moving their activities for members online. There has also been considerable attention to financial sustainability amidst the cessation of regular activities and Mass offerings. Although all these are important, there is nevertheless a risk of becoming too inwardly focused. Moreover, the prolonged nature of the pandemic with its many restrictions has a tendency to turn the current lulled state of some parishes, religious communities, and church organizations into a new normal. A ‘tomb psychology’ gradually creeps in, and this is precisely what *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) cautions about (no. 83).

The Second Vatican Council had emphasized that the Church needs to shift its gaze from an inward to an outward direction. In particular, the Council stressed that the reign of the Kingdom of God in the entire world is the goal towards which the Church must continuously strive (LG, no. 1). As Pope Francis exhorts, “Let us be permanently in a state of mission” (EG, no. 25). Hence the Church’s priority in all seasons is to proclaim the joy of the Good News. However, how does one proclaim joy in a time of prolonged suffering, desolation, and apparent hopelessness? Some answer has been given by the many pastors, church organizations, and ordinary Christians who came forward spontaneously to bring relief to those in need. In addition, the self-sacrifice and commitment of healthcare and other frontline workers also give heroic witness. These concrete responses manifest God’s saving action in a palpable way.

At the same time however, there is a need to ensure that the Church’s mission is not only in terms of external works. Otherwise, its response to the pandemic would be no different from that of secular charities and social organizations. In particular, contemporary society tends to apply solely pragmatic principles to address challenges and issues. For instance, the principle adopted globally in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic is that no one is safe until everyone is safe. However, this is ultimately self-serving and begs the question of whether certain groups of people should be safeguarded when it does not seem expedient or widely beneficial to do so. *Fratelli Tutti* has aptly raised the concern that “what is now happening, and drawing us into a perverse and barren way of thinking, is the reduction of ethics and politics to physics. Good and evil no longer exist in themselves; there is only a calculus of benefits and burdens” (no. 210).

From the Church’s point of view, the Kingdom of God is multifaceted in nature and encompasses the “personal and social, spiritual and corporeal, historical and transcendent” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2005, no. 38). In particular, more than just material progress and physical well-being, genuine flourishing includes growth in social relationships, cultural wisdom,

moral values, human interiority, authentic subjectivity, and spirituality. Nourishing this inner life of persons and societies is an especially relevant role for religious traditions. In the present digital age, a myriad of distractions prevents people from cultivating authentic human interiority and thus masks the urgency of this problem. As Pope Francis has observed, “The accumulation of constant novelties exalts a superficiality which pulls us in one direction. It becomes difficult to pause and recover depth in life ... a constant flood of new products coexists with a tedious monotony” (*Laudato Si'*, no. 113). The Pope thus exhorts people to “refuse to resign ourselves to this, and continue to wonder about the purpose and meaning of everything. Otherwise, we would simply legitimize the present situation and need new forms of escapism to help us endure the emptiness” (Ibid).

Now the prolonged disruption caused by COVID-19 is an opportunity for individuals to “pause and recover depth in life” (Ibid). Even psychologists are advocating such a confrontation with one’s deepest beliefs, values, and purpose in order to emerge stronger.<sup>1</sup> At the societal level, concerted actions that have to be taken in responding to the pandemic and other crises also require whole communities to examine and clarify common values and worldviews even on a global scale. In this regard Pope John Paul II had stressed that “the need for a foundation for personal and communal life becomes all the more pressing at a time ... in which the ephemeral is affirmed as a value and the possibility of discovering the real meaning of life is cast into doubt” (*Fides et Ratio*, no. 6). Hence a crucial dimension of the Church’s mission in the pandemic and other crises is to cultivate the foundation or soul of society by helping persons and communities discern the ultimate truth about life and reality and experience a genuine conversion in their hearts. This not only promotes authentic human flourishing but also enables people to collaborate for the common good.

### **From Exclusive to Universal Languages for Divine Truths**

The third shift needed in the Church’s missionary communication is to move from exclusivist religious language to a more universal way of engaging and conversing with people. In secular or multi-religious societies, the direct use of

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<sup>1</sup>For example, see William Berry, “The Existential Crisis You Are (or Should Be) Having,” *Psychology Today*, April 22, 2020, accessed August 15, 2021, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/sg/blog/the-second-noble-truth/202004/the-existential-crisis-you-are-or-should-be-having>.

religious language in the public sphere often causes misunderstanding and even offense. Distortions, conflicts, and adverse reactions are now further multiplied with the advent of social media.<sup>2</sup> Even among people who are open to religious beliefs, abstract doctrinal statements loaded with religious jargon are seldom effective in kindling the true joy of the Gospel.

Scripture provides a good counterexample of how Jesus uses everyday terms and experiences to help people realize divine truths. From salt and light to shepherding and vine-dressing, a relatable language is employed which enables hearers to engage with the message in a progressive way. Now in the present time, there are concepts which have been gaining increased currency in public discourse and can be used as handles to truth and value. For instance, justice, equitability, sustainability, solidarity, and human dignity are increasingly familiar and well-accepted concepts especially on the back of the pandemic and other crises such as climate change. These notions provide a common language for engaging with religious ideas such as salvation and the Kingdom of God. Although the notions do not fully equate to the religious concepts, they nevertheless serve as a medium for diverse audiences to grapple with transcendent mystery in a more apposite, inclusive, and relatable way, and to recognize in these religious principles the echoes of what is common to all humanity.

Going further, even conversing about ‘God’ is possible through more universal terms. When religious communities are open to seeing beyond their traditional doctrinal formulations, new understandings and languages about God can be gained by listening to the experiences of others, including those who do not profess any formal religion. Bernard Lonergan points out that “the question of God ... lies within man’s horizon” because “implicitly we grant that the universe is intelligible and, once that is granted, there arises the question whether the universe could be intelligible without having an intelligent ground. But that is the question about God” (Lonergan 1972, 101, 103). In other words, people’s search for meaning, purpose, and order, and their desire to make sense of the pandemic or other situations of turmoil, allude to an ultimate ground of meaning and order, and this relates to the notion of God.

Religious communities sometimes fail to recognize these opportunities for missionary dialogue because their own established images of God prevent them

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<sup>2</sup> As a recent case in point, see “Backlash Over Singapore Pastor’s ‘Sin’ Comments on Student Murder,” *UCAN News*, July 29, 2021, accessed August 15, 2021, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/backlash-over-singapore-pastors-sin-comments-on-student-murder/93490#>.

from being open to more universal conceptions. A shift is needed in terms of listening to people's diverse experiences of the divine reality and transcendent mystery, and appreciating the language that they use. For instance, physicist and novelist Alan Lightman describes a profound moment while at sea under the night sky. He writes that:

I felt an overwhelming connection to the stars, as if I were part of them. And the vast expanse of time—extending from the far distant past long before I was born and then into the far distant future long after I will die—seemed compressed to a dot. I felt connected not only to the stars but to all of nature, and to the entire cosmos. I felt a merging with something far larger than myself, a grand and eternal unity, a hint of something absolute. (Lightman 2018, 6)

Others such as Eckhart Tolle speak of “an eternal, ever-present One Life beyond the myriad forms of life that are subject to birth and death” (Tolle 1999, 2). Tolle adds that “many people use the word God to describe it; I often call it Being” (Ibid). Likewise, Charles Taylor observes how some people have felt “a sense of fullness” at certain moments of their lives, which is to them “the presence of God” (Taylor 2007, 5). Even the atheist Arthur Koestler has identified something of ‘the infinite’ which he encountered in a mystical experience.<sup>3</sup> Reflecting on the COVID-19 pandemic, sociological novelist Meira Chand remarks that “a nameless presence within us all, so often hidden or forgotten by our everyday selves, provides calm and resilience in the face of adversity, if we will but acknowledge it” (Chand 2020). All these notions of the divine reality indicate how a more universal conception and language might be found to accompany people in their deepest stirrings and help them find the divine presence amidst the crisis.

## From Theoretical Discourse to Contemplation

A fourth shift in missionary communication pertains to how meaning and insight are attained and expressed. Profound truths are often appropriated in ways that are less theoretical and more contemplative or even non-verbal. For

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<sup>3</sup> Koestler's testimony is reflected upon in Neil Ormerod and Christiaan Jacobs-Vandegeer, *Foundational Theology: A New Approach to Catholic Fundamental Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 40, note 18.

instance, in describing the *sensus fidei fidelis* of believers, the International Theological Commission points out that it is “an instinct because it is not primarily the result of rational deliberation, but is rather a form of spontaneous and natural knowledge, a sort of perception ... This is a knowledge, in other words, of a different order than objective knowledge, which proceeds by way of conceptualisation and reasoning. It is a knowledge by empathy, or a knowledge of the heart” (International Theological Commission 2014, nos. 49, 50). Similarly, the Second Vatican Council remarks that human beings “plunge into the depths of reality whenever they enter into their own heart,” adding that “God, who probes the heart, awaits them there” (*Gaudium et Spes* - GS, no. 14).

The Church can thus help people to ponder and discern about ultimate truths via what might be called an ‘epistemology of the heart.’ More than words, this involves a way of knowing through contemplation, immersion, aesthetic media, and even silence. Practices such as meditation, mindfulness, and other forms of contemplative centering have shown how interior stillness can enable people to enter the deeper part of themselves and grasp more profound truths—truths which often cannot be fully circumscribed in words. Echoing GS 14 albeit in more secular terms, the Theory U principle developed by C. Otto Scharmer highlights that people have “the capacity to connect to the deepest sources of self—to go to the inner place of stillness where knowing comes to surface,” and this involves a process of “letting go, letting come; that is, self-emptying and receptivity.”<sup>4</sup> The following experience of St Ignatius of Loyola might provide an example. His autobiography recounts an incident during which:

He sat down for a little while with his face to the river Cardoner which was running deep. While he was seated there, the eyes of his understanding began to be opened; though he did not see any vision, he understood and knew many things, both spiritual things and matters of faith and learning, and this was with so great an enlightenment that everything seemed new to him. It was as if he were a new man with a new intellect. (Munitiz and Endean 1996, 26-27)

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<sup>4</sup> Website of Presencing Institute, accessed August 15, 2021, <https://www.presencing.org/aboutus/theory-u>.

Complementing such moments of solitude and stillness, radical insight might also come through a contemplative disposition in daily life. The personal account from Thomas Merton below provides a good illustration:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. (Merton 1966, 156)

Just as efficaciously, the medium of art and various forms of the aesthetics can help people grapple with profound mystery. The Church has traditionally used music, paintings, sculpture, and architecture to convey religious teachings to ordinary people, especially those unable to appropriate literary works. In the present day, real-life images spread widely and instantly through the internet, communicating powerful meanings in ways which words alone can never do. For instance, the optics of Pope Francis' *Urbi et Orbi* address on the pandemic at St Peter's Square on a dark stormy night in March 2020 have resonated with the hearts of many people globally. Likewise, the viral image of Sister Ann Rose Nu Tawng kneeling with arms outstretched before soldiers amidst the military coup in Myanmar has struck a deep chord around the world. All these forms of non-verbal media can help people get in touch with their deepest stirrings and gain a sense of what is true, good, and valuable.

Yet another powerful medium for grappling with profound truth is nature. Being fully present to nature and appreciating its simplicity, complexity, beauty, gentleness, power, and mystery can help a person gain deeper awareness about life and reality. In fact, nature is often a channel for encountering the divine. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor highlights one such experience of Bede Griffiths who recounts the following incident:

I walked out alone in the evening and heard the birds singing in that full chorus of song, which can only be heard at that time of the year at dawn or at sunset. I remember now the shock of surprise with which the sound broke on my ears. It seemed to me that I had never heard the birds singing before... Everything then grew still as the sunset faded and the veil of dusk began to cover the earth. I remember now the feeling of awe which came over me. I felt inclined to kneel on the ground, as though I had been standing in the presence of an angel; and

I hardly dared to look on the face of the sky, because it seemed as though it was but a veil before the face of God. (2007, 5)

As can be seen in all these experiences, the interior realization of fundamental truths and the conviction it consequently engenders is not something that can be manufactured by human control. Rather, it often arrives as a gratuitous gift that comes even when least expected. From the perspective of Catholic theology, genuine insight is a divine grace bestowed as a gift of the Holy Spirit, though it may require human effort in preparing the soil to receive it. As Pope Francis writes, “Spiritual discernment does not exclude existential, psychological, sociological or moral insights drawn from the human sciences. At the same time, it transcends them. Nor are the Church’s sound norms sufficient. We should always remember that discernment is a grace. Even though it includes reason and prudence, it goes beyond them” (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, no. 170). Missionary communication thus needs to cultivate and respect the contemplative space that people require to appropriate profound truths with God’s grace – a grace that often enters through their own experiences and in its own time.

### **From Unilateral Action to Pro-Active Collaboration**

Finally, the Church needs to shift its missionary paradigm to one of pro-active collaboration with relevant civic groups. The landscape of civil society has changed significantly in recent years with the emergence of new protagonists and alliances working towards the common good. Social movements led by the youth, business ethics networks, individual and organizational advocates, and global networks now comprise the signs of the times with which the Church needs to engage. In the past, the Church’s model of mission has mainly taken the form of Church-run institutions playing a unilateral or leading role in providing services. Now the Church not only needs to see itself as a collaborator but also be more pro-active in joining movements and conversations led by others at the frontier. One important conversation pertains to building back better from the pandemic and other crises while negotiating new values in a changing society.

In some places, the public activities of religious organizations are met with suspicion due to fears about proselytization. A dialogical and collaborative approach helps to mitigate these resistances. More significantly, dialogue and

collaboration accord with the principle of synodality. In relation to the pandemic, Pope Francis has highlighted that “in this time we realised that it is important to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development” (Pope Francis 2020, 47). Yet the Church’s collaboration with wider society should not entail its self-censoring of all references to divine and spiritual realities. Indeed, the pandemic and other crises such as climate change have served to highlight humans’ vulnerability and limitations, and their need for God. *Fratelli Tutti* observes that “when, in the name of an ideology, there is an attempt to remove God from a society, that society ends up adoring idols, and very soon men and women lose their way, their dignity is trampled and their rights violated” (no. 274).

The truth of God who suffers with and for us in Christ is a central and timely message of the Church for the world, even as the Church has sometimes faltered in communicating this message convincingly. As discussed above, what is needed is to discourse about divine realities in ways that are inclusive and resonant with shared human experiences. In *The Universal Christ*, Richard Rohr calls attention to the presence of the theological virtues in all persons without exception, and points out that “from the very beginning, faith, hope, and love are planted deep within our nature – indeed they are our very nature ... But we have to awaken, allow, and advance this core by saying a conscious yes to it and drawing upon it as a reliable and Absolute Source” (2019, 65). Awakening this Source amongst humanity is indeed the need of the hour in the COVID-19 pandemic, especially when people are growing weary and losing hope amidst its prolongation. The urgent task of religious traditions is to call attention to the ultimate Source of life, which alone gives meaning and hope in all situations.

Along with people’s innate sense of the divine, the Church can also promote dialogue towards universal values. Contrary to relativism and its current expression in the post-truth culture, the Christian faith has always held up the reality of universal truths. Pope Benedict XVI points out that “in all cultures there are examples of ethical convergence ... as an expression of the one human nature, willed by the Creator” and that “adherence to the law etched on human hearts is the precondition for all constructive social cooperation” (*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 59). This view is echoed in practice even beyond the Church, such as in global conventions to promote ethical standards. Vaclav Havel (1995) rightly notes that

lying dormant in the deepest roots of most, if not all, cultures there is an essential similarity, something that could be made—if the will to do

so existed—a genuinely unifying starting point for that new code of human co-existence ... Don't we find somewhere in the foundations of most religions and cultures ... common elements such as respect for what transcends us, whether we mean the mystery of being, or a moral order that stands above us?

Thus, a key aspect of the Church's mission in these times is to promote the discernment and articulation of universal values and a commitment to them.

### **Putting It all Together**

As an example of how the above paradigm shifts can be put into practice, an ecclesial community could explore an initiative in which its members collaborate with other religious and civic organizations to reach out to a particular target group during the pandemic. One such group could be the youth, especially those struggling to cope with the disruption to their lives and seeking meaning in all the suffering. Alternatively, another group could be formed comprising leaders or representatives from various sectors of the local community. A series of conversations could be organized in which all members have an equal role in sharing their experiences of the pandemic including their fears and anxieties, their hopes and dreams, and their questions and doubts. The responsibility of the initiator is not to provide answers but to hold the space in which the enquiring, seeking, reflecting, and even grieving can occur safely, and to be part of the process as a fellow participant. In addition, all group members could share and examine their underlying beliefs, assumptions, and worldviews. Methods for communal dialogue such as the Spiritual Conversation can be useful to this end.<sup>5</sup> In this way, there is mutual accompaniment, genuine sharing, equal participation, and attentive listening without judgment.

Gradually, deeper questions can be explored with regard to what is ultimately true, good, and valuable. Contemplative practices that resonate with an epistemology of the heart can be used to help participants get in touch with their innermost stirrings and insights. New understandings can then be shared in terms that are inclusive and universal. For instance, the group members might rediscover the divine reality as a primordial life-giving force which flows in the world, unfolding through the vicissitudes of history while creating, vivifying,

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<sup>5</sup> A description and discussion of this method is found in Brian Grogan, "Give the Spirit the Mic! – A Strategy for Communal Discernment," *The Furrow* (May 2020): 259-268.

inter-relating, and renewing. They might see that despite the darkness, there is nevertheless a positive life-force which brings the cosmos towards communion and flourishing, working through the unique gifts of each person. This then implies that genuine well-being consists in the development and fruitful integration of all aspects of reality, including the physical, social, cultural, intellectual, psychological, moral, and spiritual. Meanwhile human beings participate in freedom with the life-giving force, and consequently, earthly history can undergo both progress and decline. Still, the life-giving force is everywhere present, and the universe's ultimate fulfilment is found in oneness with it.

Over time, greater trust can be built in the group through its journey of mutual sharing, enquiring, contemplating, and reflecting. From such fellowship, people might find the courage and strength to weather the storms they have to face, including the pandemic. Moreover, a rediscovery of the Ultimate Source of life would lead to greater faith, hope, and love such that decisions and actions, whether individual or communal, could be reoriented accordingly. In this way, the Church can journey with persons and communities amidst the pandemic and other crises, and together discover the true joy of the Gospel.

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## Interculturality in the post-Pandemic World

*Lazar T. Stanislaus, SVD*

### Introduction

Interculturality in the secular world had taken root a long time back. Many corporate companies, international institutions and organizations have realized the importance of interculturality and have taken some measures to form the organizations or groups with certain orientations. More studies have been done in this regard on how to improve intercultural living and working together. More so, intercultural communication has come a long way in understanding how to communicate across various cultures so that everyone has the best understanding. There are numerous studies too on this subject (Eilers 1987).

Interculturality in the church is gaining much ground now. Not only the international congregations are looking for ways to strengthen intercultural living and mission, but also local congregations or at the diocesan level too, people want to understand and work towards interculturality in their society. This is because, the world is changing due to globalization, migration, and transnationalization; monoculture is slowly melting and giving way for multicultural society. This is a reality.

As the world has experienced the effect of the coronavirus, we realize that we are in a fragile world. This pandemic is a time of global crisis – not just a health crisis but also economic, political, geopolitical and social crisis. Every government, local church, and religious congregation search for answers to respond to this crisis according to the local context. As the coronavirus pandemic seems to be in the last phase of its effect, we try to understand the role of culture and more so interculturality in this context.

## Understanding Culture

Culture is one of the basic concepts in social sciences and it is described in various ways by different social scientists. It is defined according to one's perspective and interest; anthropologists, sociologists, materialists, economists, artists, believers, non-believers, etc., all define culture. Thus, it is not easy to define it in one proper way, but everyone understands that culture is part of every human being and society.

In general, culture simply refers to customs and beliefs, art and way of life, and the social organization of a particular country, society, or group of people. Edward Burnett Tylor, one of the first anthropologists from the 19th century gave an inclusive definition of culture in 1871. "Culture or civilization" according to him "is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man (and woman) as a member of society" (Tylor 1871, 1). Spencer-Oatey acknowledges the concept of interpretation of behaviors saying, "Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioral conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behavior and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behavior" (2008, 3).

Most definitions of culture may be subsumed under three general categories: (i) as a way of life typical of a group, (ii) as a system of symbols, meanings, and cognitive schemata transmitted through symbolic codes, and (iii) as a set of adaptive strategies for survival related to ecology and resources. These three views are now seen not as mutually exclusive but rather as complementary (Michael 2015).

Culture is a living system. Every culture is in a process of adapting to newer changes occurring in the world. It is dynamic and changing. "Cultures are constantly changing because the individuals of the society – the architects of culture – are constantly modifying their 'plan for successful living'" (Luzbetak 1988, 22). One example regarding the change in cultural pattern: in Andhra Pradesh, India, for a funeral service, men, women, and children go to the cemetery and do the final rites. In Tamil Nadu, women and children were not allowed to go to the cemetery for burial service some years back, but now they do; and there is no tension between men and women; this is because of the learning from others. Culture changes. In addition, due to globalization and migration, various groups move from one place to another and the understanding of culture is significant for healthy interaction.

## **Interculturality**

In Asia and in the world, society is passing from monocultural and bicultural community to multicultural or international community. These multicultural communities are becoming cross-cultural communities and want to grow as intercultural communities. In this context, let us understand what is interculturality. Interculturality refers to the sustained interaction of people raised in different cultural backgrounds. In contrast to multicultural or cross-cultural settings, it denotes mutual exchange between cultures that implies learning of other cultures, accepting of good elements in other cultures, appreciating one another, willing to be challenged by the other because some cultural elements may not have good values or may not promote the principle of justice, equality, harmony and so forth. This interaction can be challenging, but it can lead to transformation and enrichment of all involved. Now let me define interculturality.

[Interculturality] is a sustained interaction of people raised in different cultural backgrounds that leads to mutually reciprocal relationships among and between cultures; people learn and grow together, mutually enrich one another by these learnings and integration, and challenge one another on the cultural value differences and practices that gear towards mutual transformation. (Stanislaus and Taucher 2021, xiv)

Building intercultural communities is more than tolerance of other cultures. We appreciate other cultures and take the good elements and appropriate them as our own. In this, there is enrichment to the cultures. We challenge the life-negating elements in other cultures; this is a difficult process. This is done only with the spiritual and faith framework. We evaluate or judge the other cultural elements in the light of the gospel teaching. Everyone is created in the image of God, and man or woman, boys or girls are to be respected as they are the children of God. Being sensitive to the cultural elements and education of a community would pave a way to understand culture in the light of the teaching of the gospel.

First, building intercultural communities is significant. As missionaries or church personnel or Christian community, we build intercultural communities and we involve ourselves in intercultural mission, interacting with the larger

community and bringing God's love through our ministries while giving importance to the cultural elements in the local place.<sup>1</sup>

We build intercultural communities moved by the Spirit. We recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in every culture and all peoples. "The love of Christ and our rootedness in the Word lead us to a renewed and transformed commitment in our mission. Intercultural mission is our way of giving witness to the unity and diversity of the Kingdom of God. Efforts to respect and love the people to who we have been sent, and to learn their language and culture, are expressions of our missionary zeal."<sup>2</sup>

### Components in Building Intercultural Communities

Building intercultural communities takes time. Since persons from various cultures interact, they need to have some components which would help them build a community. Taking into consideration of suggestions from Anthony Gittins (2015, 4-6), the following are possible components:

- Intercultural living is *intentional*, and one makes efforts to build the community with various cultures. The community is built with the purpose of showing to others that different cultures can live together and work together. The religious communities are built to be witness to others that we can succeed in living together.
- *Faith* is expressed in a culture; and religion and culture are related. Faith is lived with expressions of cultural forms. Thus, persons with faith in God seeking harmony and peace without fanaticism or fundamentalism would appreciate others' faith and seek ways to live in harmony.
- Living under one roof or in one house with members from various countries is not intercultural, but *building a home* is significant. Other than being motivated by faith, one needs to cultivate a value system – appreciation, openness to others, ready to learn from others, tolerance, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> For detailed discussion and understanding see Lazar T. Stanislaus and Martin Ueffing (eds.) *Intercultural Living*, Part 1, and *Intercultural Mission*, Part II, New Delhi: ISPCK, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Documents of the 18th General Chapter SVD 2018, *In Word and Deed*, No. 6, Rome: SVD Publications, 2018, no.30.

- Striving to live in an intercultural community is not natural but *supernatural*. If relating with other cultures is undertaken from a supernatural motive, faith in God plays a greater role. It is not achieved by a simple mastery of new techniques; it requires virtue and indeed the transformation or conversion of all involved.
- Having goodwill is not enough to bring about intercultural living. In history, just having goodwill did not achieve success. Other than goodwill, one requires *commitment and the sustained hard work* for the acquisition of both skills and virtue.
- Intercultural living demands graciousness, diplomacy, compromise, mutual respect, serious dialogue, and the development of a common and sustaining vision. A *vision* is something that inspires the common effort of a lifetime and provides appropriate means to achieve a desired end.

## Challenges of Interculturality

### 1. Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is a term applied to a cultural or ethnic bias – whether conscious or unconscious – in which an individual views the world from the perspective of his or her own group, establishing the in-group as archetypal and rating all other groups with reference to this ideal. This form of tunnel vision often results in: (a) an inability to adequately understand cultures that are different from one's own and (b) value judgments that prefer the in-group and assert its inherent superiority. While having a positive attitude toward and appreciation of one's culture is very healthy, *ethnocentrism* is a dangerous tendency because it views other cultures with narrow vision and judges them negatively (Schroeder 2021, 18-19). One needs to go beyond one's own culture and be open to understand the worldview and experience of the others, from their perspective.

### 2. Prejudices and Stereotypes

Prejudice is a negative attitude and feeling toward an individual or a group based solely on one's membership in a particular culture or social group.

Explicit prejudice – negative feelings about an out-group that are openly admitted – and implicit prejudice – which is the relatively automatic and unconscious in-group preference – can be noted in a person or a group. A stereotype is a specific belief or assumption (thoughts) about individuals based solely on their membership in a group, regardless of their individual characteristics. Stereotypes can be positive or negative and when overgeneralized are applied to all members of a group. With ethnocentric attitudes, prejudice, and stereotypes are expressed, or when one acts on these notions, then it creates harm and hinders the formation of a healthy relationship with other cultures. For example, Americans are aggressive and dominant, Japanese are orderly, Germans are hardworking, and Chinese are cheaters, etc.

### **3. Conflicts**

Conflicts are part of interpersonal relationships, just as joy and happiness are. It can be at the individual level – disagreements with family and friends, co-workers and strangers over simple to complex issues. It can be at the community level – issues of marriage or land between one clan/village and another clan/village. It can be at the international level – fights between one country and another country or taking hostages and terrorists groups and so forth. Often conflicts “surface due to misunderstandings, miscommunication, different values and perspectives, ethnocentrism and other prejudices among individuals or groups of different cultural, national, and regional backgrounds” (Ibid, 18). It is necessary to deal with conflicts actively and intentionally. When conflicts arise, either dominant groups or less dominant groups cannot function properly; it disturbs the atmosphere, interpersonal relationship, and common task.

### **4. Self-victimization**

In cultural interaction, certainly there will be moments when not everyone is satisfied with a decision or with the functioning of a project or someone’s view. There could be many reasons for dissatisfaction and even contempt. And it is possible that instead of looking into one’s own personality or weaknesses, he/she can play a card of ‘culture,’ that ‘my cultural group is not respected or not considered’; or ‘I am not appreciated because of my culture.’ This is rather dangerous; instead of open discussion and healthy interaction, one likes to defend with cultural cards.

## **5. Majoritarian Cultural Insensitivity**

Majority vs minority concept is complex. In functioning of a community, when a majority group tries to impose its values, orientations, concepts, and practices, etc. on others, a minority cultural group could be slowly extinguished; thus, conflict arises, and confrontation and even fight can occur. The community can always be in a conflict mode, and this is not healthy. Therefore, being sensitive to minority groups and giving space to grow are essential. Healthy interaction as well as respect and appreciation of majority and minority groups pave the way for intercultural living. Consider this aspect not only in various countries, but in small religious communities and Christian groups.

## **6. Rich Countries and Poor Countries**

On the international level, when people of poor countries migrate and live in a rich country, often there are prejudices and expressions of unwantedness. When a rich country is more generous, and although poor country people are accepted, the interaction normally is not smooth. Building an intercultural community is an uphill task. People look down upon the other, or a seclusion is created, and donor-beneficiary syndrome exists. Even in a religious community, there are a lot of challenges to having a proper understanding, respect and equal sharing with the persons coming from rich and poor countries.

## **Culture-General Frameworks**

Interculturality demands learning about other cultures. One cannot learn every culture and language in a community/country if there are numerous groups. But advances in the field of interculturality have shown that there is a number of broad categories involving the notions of cultural difference and similarity that can be used to help us better understand and respond to peoples of other cultures. Some of these include (a) those between peoples with a socio-centric orientation (collectivism) as opposed to those with an individual-centric orientation (individualism); (b) with regard to relations of power, people with 'low power distance' versus those with 'high power distance'; (c) with regard to the need for security, those with 'low uncertainty avoidance' versus those with 'high uncertainty avoidance'; and (d) with regard to moral behavior pattern,

those with ‘mostly share orientation’ versus those with ‘mostly guilt orientation’ (Hufner-Kemper and Kemper 2015, 97-101). ‘Culture-general’ frameworks, such as these, offer us great possibilities for understanding and crossing over to others. By learning more about cultural difference and similarity, and by gaining the ability through practice to change our behavior and cross over to meet the cultural expectations of people of other cultures, or with other frames of reference, we will be in a better position to bridge these barriers in our ministries. But in order to move forward more effectively we need to know where to begin. We need a tool to help us learn where we stand.

### **Intercultural Competency Scale (ICS)**

The best tool is the Intercultural Competence Scale (ICS) of Muriel Elmer.<sup>3</sup> The ICS is based on studies initiated by the Canadian International Development Agency which were taken up and improved by American missionaries. It measures 12 key characteristics including behaviors and attitudes that have proven to be linked to intercultural effectiveness. It is a 45-item online questionnaire that takes about 20 minutes, and the results are immediately available. One can see those characteristics where one is weak and a set of ‘skill-builders’ is provided which offers concrete activities leading to improvement. I give you below those 12 characteristics; one can examine them deeply and assess oneself on how to improve oneself in relation to others.

1. Approachability: A person who establishes relationships with others easily
2. Intercultural Receptivity: Interest in people, especially people from other cultures
3. Positive Orientation: The expectation that you can be a success, living and working in another culture
4. Forthrightness: Acting and speaking out readily
5. Social Openness: The inclination to interact with people regardless of their differences

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<sup>3</sup> Muriel Elmer’s thesis on Intercultural Competency Scale is unpublished. The related materials are available: Timothy Norton, “Intercultural Sensitivity: Building Awareness and Competence” in *Engaging our Diversity: Interculturality and Consecrated Life Today*, edited by Maria Cimperman and Roger P. Schroeder, New York: Maryknoll, Orbis, 2020, 142-147; See also John Kirby, [https://www.gestaltcleveland.org/s/Kirby-ICSI\\_Conflict-styles-and-Intercultural-Competence.pdf](https://www.gestaltcleveland.org/s/Kirby-ICSI_Conflict-styles-and-Intercultural-Competence.pdf)

6. Enterprise: The tendency to approach tasks and activities in new and creative ways
7. Showing Respect: Treating others in ways that make them feel valued
8. Perseverance: The tendency to remain in a situation and feel positive about it even in the face of challenges
9. Flexibility: Open to culture learning
10. Cultural Perspectivism: The capacity to imaginatively enter another cultural viewpoint
11. Venturesome Spirit: Inclination towards customs and behavior which are novel or different
12. Social Confidence: Being self-assured in social contexts

### **Conflict Styles and Intercultural Competence**

As we have seen above, conflict is one of the challenges in an intercultural or multicultural society. In this section, let us deal with conflict styles and how this can help individuals and groups to have competence to cope up with the situation for a better understanding. Conflict Styles are a core **cultural generalization framework**.

Cultural generalizations (individualist vs collective or high vs. low context) support complex perceptions and experience of commonality and difference. One can perceive common behavior patterns in a particular orientation; they are evident from the way they respond or react. Here a greater understanding of their behavior would help to understand where conflicts arise. Research on individualism vs collectivism or high vs low context or other cultural generalization frameworks all identify the cultural dimension of **direct/indirect** as central for dealing with disagreements across cultures. These direct/indirect dealings or expressions have consequences in relationships and building up of a group.

Research supports the centrality and variability of **emotional expressiveness and restraint** as fundamental dimensions of cultural differences in conflict style. Mitchell R. Hammer in his research has articulated how an inventory could be taken to understand intercultural conflicts; he framed a tool for Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory (ICSI) (2008, 227-228). Understanding the expressions and their consequences is significant in knowing the others where we agree or differ. This helps how to deal with the person/s in a particular situation. In this section, we deal with conflict styles. We are not

saying which is better or which style one should avoid, but only stating that when someone is under stress or has a problem, how the other person can understand him/her and deal with the situation. Greater understanding will help one's own style and will assist to avoid confrontation and to seek peaceful resolution.

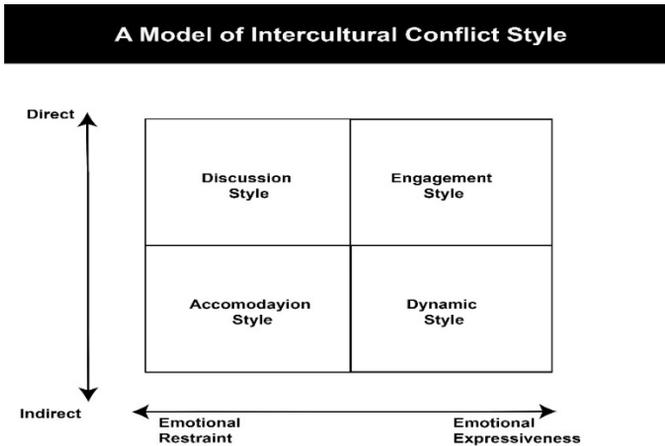
Generally, conflict involves two elements: disagreements and emotion. One perceives substantial disagreement with another's perspective; thus, they think that their goals are blocked or do not agree on certain moral concepts. Conflicts normally have emotional reactions. There is a perceived increase of stress, anxiety, anger, and fear. One can feel: "Your actions compromise my goals or convictions." Here the relationships are threatened; tension increases when self-identity is threatened. And one falls back into culturally appropriated mode of dealing with conflict and response which one had learned culturally to keep up his/her conviction (Kirby 2016, 34).

The conflict styles used for communication are learned patterns in a community. He/she learns these patterns on how to express and deal with the emotions. They are learned through primary socialization in their family/culture/ethnic group. For example, when people suffer or have great loss, different emotions are expressed. In India, if someone has died in a family, women have to cry explicitly; otherwise, this will be considered that she is stone hearted and is perceived negatively by other women. In Japan, women don't cry when there is loss; if they do, they are considered weak. These are learned through socialization in a culture.

Approach to conflict is patterned and culturally grounded; they can be changed over time based on experience in different cultures. What is significant is that different styles of communication in conflict situations escalate tensions, divisions, and even lead to fight. In Indonesian indigenous people's culture, the elders are highly respected, and younger people cannot question them even if they are wrong in their judgements or directions to others. Whereas in Western European countries, age does not matter; everyone is equal; a young man or an adult will question the elders if they have done something wrong.

Therefore, conflict styles are studied among the cultures as a particular culture's manner of disagreements and communicating emotion with another cultural group. Here, variations of direct dealing group with emotionally restraint expression will result in *discussion style*; direct dealing-group with emotionally expressive way would result in *engagement style*. The indirect dealing group with emotionally restraint manner will result in *accommodation style* and with emotionally expressive manner will result in *dynamic style*. Research has shown

these variations and the four major styles (Hammer, 226; Hufner-Kemper and Kemper, 104). As we deal with human beings, this is not hundred percent accurate; depending on the composition of the groups, the changes and development of cultural patterns in a group/country, personality complexes, some people may act differently than commonly perceived.



The above diagram gives an illustration of these interactions (Ibid). Let us briefly explain the various conflict styles (Hammer, 226-227; Hufner-Kemper and Kemper, 103-105; Kirby, 34-36).

**Discussion Style:** In this style, people want to express themselves verbally and directly to other persons. They want to keep their emotion restrained but use precise language: e.g., “Say what you mean and mean what you say.” They find it comfortable to talk directly and use facts in their arguments and want to keep their feelings and emotions restrained. They consider that expressing emotion is dangerous and it will not help to resolve a conflict or disagreement.

**Engagement Style:** People who want to express their emotions and want to involve directly with others regarding some concerns or disagreement have this engagement style. They are verbally direct and confrontational; emotionally expressive, they feel that in this manner they can communicate well, and others would know not only what they say but also how they feel. Normally, sincerity is demonstrated by intense verbal and nonverbal expression of emotion. They

are comfortable with personal confrontation between parties. Emotion is put on the table!

**Accommodation Style:** People in this style emphasize an indirect approach; they don't want to express themselves directly with the persons; they may take time to express or express their concerns using some connected phrases or stories. They are also emotionally restrained, keeping control over their feelings. There will be ambiguity and circumlocution so that conflict can be contained and not escalated. Emotional calm and reserve are maintained to build interpersonal harmony and counter harmful disagreement. They believe that intense expression of emotion is dangerous and hinders resolution. Indirect speech, stories, metaphors, and reliance on third parties are essential in this style.

**Dynamic Style:** The cultural groups who express themselves indirectly but with intense emotional expression. They feel comfortable expressing all their emotions; hyperbole, repetition and associative argument using ambiguity, stories, metaphors, humor and third parties are part of their strategies to resolve a problem. More emotional confrontational discourse and expression are common. When one expresses emotions openly, people view their credibility in their expressions.

### **Perceptions of the Various Styles**

When people in various cultures engage in these styles, they are comfortable in their own styles, and they believe that this is a proper way to resolve a conflict. As such, we are not passing judgment on each of these styles; each style has strength and weakness. People have learnt or adopted a particular style from their cultural groups. The concern is to be aware of one's style and to be aware of the other culture/s' styles. Once we are aware of this and willing to solve a problem or discuss a concern for an amicable living or working together, then each one makes some adjustment, understands others' expressiveness or non-verbal communication and emotions, and seeks to find a solution without doing harm to one another. For example, when a Japanese (emotionally non-expressive) and a Spanish or Irish (emotionally expressive) person live together, they will find it difficult to resolve a conflict. But when they know their styles and they try to understand the other's styles of expression or behavior, they can find ways to resolve a problem. Well, this needs a lot of patience, forgiveness, and treating others as my loving neighbor.

**Self-perceived Strengths**

<p><b>DISCUSSION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confronts problems</li> <li>• Elaborates arguments</li> <li>• Maintains calm atmosphere</li> </ul>	<p><b>ENGAGEMENT</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides detailed explanations, instructions and information</li> <li>• Expresses opinions</li> <li>• Shows feeling</li> </ul>
<p><b>ACCOMODATION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Considers alternative meanings to ambiguous messages</li> <li>• Able to control emotional outbursts</li> <li>• Sensitive to feelings of the other party</li> </ul>	<p><b>DYNAMIC</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses third parties to gather information and resolve conflicts</li> <li>• Skilled at observing changes in nonverbal behavior</li> <li>• Comfortable with strong emotions</li> </ul>

**Weaknesses as Perceived by Other Styles**

<p><b>DISCUSSION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty reading “between the lines”</li> <li>• Appears logical but unfeeling</li> <li>• Appears uncomfortable with emotional arguments</li> </ul>	<p><b>ENGAGEMENT</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appears unconcerned with the views and feelings of others</li> <li>• Appears dominating &amp; rude</li> <li>• Appears uncomfortable with viewpoints that are separated from emotion</li> </ul>
<p><b>ACCOMODATION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty in voicing own opinion</li> <li>• Appears uncommitted &amp; dishonest</li> </ul>	<p><b>DYNAMIC</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rarely “gets to the point”</li> <li>• Appears unreasonable and devious</li> <li>• Appears “too emotional”</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty in providing elaborated explanations</li> </ul>	
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As the above tables<sup>4</sup> express, these are various perceptions; they are not exhaustive, only some samples are given in these columns. No one can say which style is better to resolve, and which is worse. Every style of conflict needs to be understood by the persons in each situation. More often, the personality of the person, spirituality, and weight of the problem play greater roles. In every situation when a group of persons are involved, majority and minority groups in a conflict are to be taken care in looking at the problems. As Christian groups, values of the Gospel, the virtues of Christianity, and forgiveness are vital to resolve a conflict. Harmony comes not by resolving problems but by not allowing a problem to arise in the first place; and if there are problems, our faith, human, and community values must be adopted. Mitchell Hammer says,

Intercultural conflict style differences represent an important, although largely unexamined, aspect of how conflict escalates – even when individuals genuinely desire to cooperate and work out their disagreements. Developing awareness of these style differences begins with oneself. How an individual profiles on the ICS Inventory provides a clear window on how that person will likely frame and respond to a problem that arises or a conflict that erupts. Recognizing how one’s own approach differs from others then becomes the basis for increased sensitivity to difference and an improved ability to better bridge across these intercultural style patterns of difference. (230)

John Kirby in his notes and discussion explains that researchers have placed some countries in each of the styles.<sup>5</sup> But one needs to understand that in every country or continent there are multiple cultures. The diagram below is more of a general framework to understand a country and not in absolute terms. Countries like India, Latin American countries or African countries are placed in the center of the diagram indicating that nearly 50 percent are in their allotted style, but another 50 percent also adopt other styles. These are general indications.

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<sup>4</sup> See the notes of John Kirby, [https://www.gestaltcleveland.org/s/Kirby-ICSI\\_Conflict-styles-and-Intercultural-Competence.pdf](https://www.gestaltcleveland.org/s/Kirby-ICSI_Conflict-styles-and-Intercultural-Competence.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> John Kirby, [https://www.gestaltcleveland.org/s/Kirby-ICSI\\_Conflict-styles-and-Intercultural-Competence.pdf](https://www.gestaltcleveland.org/s/Kirby-ICSI_Conflict-styles-and-Intercultural-Competence.pdf)

**Examples of Styles**

<p><b>DISCUSSION</b>                  N. Europe                  White America                  Canada  <i>Latin America</i></p>	<p><b>ENGAGEMENT</b>                  African American                  Russia                  Greece  <i>India</i></p>
<p><i>American Indians</i>  <b>ADAPTATION</b>                  Japan                  Southeast Asia                  Mexico</p>	<p><i>Africa</i>  <b>DYNAMIC</b>                  Arab Countries</p>

As said above, Mitchell R. Hammer (2005) has developed the ICSI; this is an 18-item-self-scoring questionnaire that assesses an individual’s core approach for solving problems and resolving conflicts. The space in this chapter does not allow me to give the details on how to do this Inventory. But I have used this inventory in intercultural groups in South Korea and Italy. At times people guess before doing the Inventory that they are of a particular style, but often they find a different style after doing the test. This is because in becoming aware of oneself in doing this Inventory, one finds the actual style. This helps them deal with others or deal with themselves in a conflict situation.

**Post-Pandemic World**

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fragile world. As many governments played a vital role in containing the virus, narrow nationalism, racism, casteism, and rich nations protecting themselves also were in full manifestation. Poor nations were left to the mercy of the virus; the poor, physically disabled people and children were dependent on others’ goodness. “Ableism and its attendant prejudices took on added forms of exclusion and violence in the time of the pandemic” (Mundanikkal 2021, 288). At the same time, it has also evoked responses from goodwill people and some nations reach out to the neighbors. The collaborative spirit has been rather minimal during the pandemic; on the contrary, prejudices and suspicions of others have grown. But one can look at this pandemic also as an opportunity to look within and how we live and relate with other cultures and nationalities in our communities. Sr. Marie Dennis

(2020), the most senior woman working at the Vatican, has written, “Although powerful sectors in the dominant culture will try (tried) to respond to this crisis by deepening the violence and injustice, equally possible is a dramatic shift to promote non-violent values and inclusive security for the whole earth community.” The time of pandemic is truly a *kairos* movement (Bevans 2021, 31), an opportunity, as Pope Francis says, for “epochal change.”<sup>6</sup> In this context, how can we promote building intercultural communities? *I propose FIVE conversions that can help us in this post-pandemic world.*

### 1. Conversion from Ethnocentrism

As we noted earlier, ethnocentrism is a challenge. Ethnocentrism is a tendency to look at the world or other cultural groups primarily from the perspective of one’s own culture. Part of ethnocentrism is the belief that one’s own race, ethnic or cultural group is the most important or that some or all aspects of its culture are superior to those of other groups. Ethnocentrism often leads to incorrect assumptions about others’ behavior based on their own norms, values, and beliefs. In extreme cases, a group of individuals may see another culture as wrong or immoral and because of this, they may try to change, sometimes forcibly, the group to their own ways of living. Ethnocentrism is a strong sense of ethnic group self-centeredness, which involves intergroup expressions of ethnic group preference, superiority, purity, and exploiting others, and intragroup expressions of ethnic group cohesion and devotion.

Knowing one’s own culture and being aware of its values, norms and belief system is good, but when one assumes this is the best and the only way, it leads to confrontation with others. This concept does not see the good values and beliefs in others but sees other customs as wrong and makes immediate judgement based on one’s own culture. Pandemic has caused some people to increase in ethnocentrism. In the post-modern and post-pandemic world, one needs conversion from this superiority complex and inward looking to recognizing the other cultures and seeing the goodness in them. Pope Francis calls for a “culture of encounter” (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 216). Loving a neighbor is not just sharing medicine or giving food to the hungry; it is also recognizing that others are humans, that they have values, and that they have some goodness to

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/pope-calls-for-global-solidarity-to-confront-epochal-challenge-posed-by-coronavirus-120041200895\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/pope-calls-for-global-solidarity-to-confront-epochal-challenge-posed-by-coronavirus-120041200895_1.html)

offer. The first thing in building intercultural community is to be converted from our ethnocentrism.

## **2. Conversion from Egoism**

Egoism denotes self-interest alone or excessive concern for oneself with or without exaggerated feelings of self-importance. The three types of egoism – psychological egoism, ethical egoism, and rational egoism – are all about getting the best outcome for themselves. When persons are concerned only about themselves, about their families, or only about their cultural groups, and not considering the welfare of the other, then, there is bound to be clash, mistrust, conflict, and collision, etc. A multicultural community will not live in peace; and more misunderstandings, quarrels are bound to occur. Self-interest does not allow oneself and others to grow or establish healthy interpersonal relationships. Everything is viewed with suspicion and does not allow the others to live in peace. Conversion from egoism needs deep spirituality; when life, community, other cultures are seen from a faith perspective, conversion is possible. Only when persons get over from this self-interest and seek the others' interest and welfare, peace would dwell. Then, they can experience the divine and the power of the Spirit dwelling in a community. During this pandemic, some people have consciously or unconsciously fallen into this egoism. A world free from viruses can be possible only when people convert themselves from their egoism.

## **3. Conversion from Narrow Nationalism to Being Open to Other Peoples**

COVID-19 exposed some of the stark realities of our world; those economically powerful countries and those in power and those who reap benefits from the status quo tried to portray nationalism that can protect them alone. Nationalism is good; everyone seeks identity and is proud of his/her nation and concerned about the nation. But narrow nationalism is that which provokes hatred and negation of others in a community and causes injustice – not treating others as humans or treating them as second-class citizens. During this pandemic, some leaders and groups went to any extent, even unleashing of violence over other nationalities or groups. This has happened in some countries and some leaders gained more power from this narrow nationalist approach.

Conversion to being open to other nationalities and other cultural groups is not only just action but this is the way for the future. “We are at the threshold

of many implausible uncertainties and ambiguities, and the Enlightenment paradigm of reason and human development is ripped to shreds, and rock-like certainties of the past are collapsing like a pack of cards. Humankind needs to shed a lot of its assumptions and enter with a deep sense of humility..." (Wilfred 2021, 24). And this can be possible only through conversion of all people and being respectful and open to other peoples.

Felix Wilfred, after analyzing the COVID-19 situation, gives a profound thought: "What is left for the humans of the future is but a world of love, friendship, a sense of purpose in life, contemplation of beauty, solidarity, and compassion ... the care and effective concern for others, greater trust, generosity, and undying hope for a different world. These will be the pillars of a new civilization to come" (Ibid, 25). When these paths are adopted, intercultural community will be a reality.

#### **4. Conversion from Consumerism to Care for Creation**

The pandemic is "a warning call against the encroachment upon the non-human beings pointing out the possibility of a world where the onslaught of conspicuous consumption is bridled" (Mundanikkal, 289). Pandemic showed that we could live with minimum things. Consumerist society does not care about nature and surroundings. The waste that is produced from this society becomes a scandal because there are millions of people who do not get proper food. In this context, when we consider building intercultural communities, conversion to care for creation is significant. Ecological interculturality would pave for salubrious and wholesome society. It "proposes to rescue the relationship between humanity and earth, body and earth, as we are the sacred land, we are the gift of God. This relationship results mainly due to the understanding, appreciation and intercultural dynamism. With the culture of the people, of forests and rivers, we have to learn to become a sustainable society" (Castro, 278), and this conversion is being stressed in the Church, especially by Pope Francis with his encyclical *Laudato Si*. He said, "The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion" (no. 219). Conversion to ecological interculturality is an ethical project, "that is an ethics of care, that has as its recipient the mother earth and the victims who suffer the result of its destruction in the body, in marginalization and social exclusion" (Castro, 274).

## 5. Conversion from Triumphalism to Interreligious Dialogue

As a Christian community, we have been talking for a long time about going beyond our triumphalist attitude and being humble in following God's mission. Triumphalism of Christian community with its expressions and behavior is not what Christ wants. Pope Francis has reiterated, "I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets" (*Evangelii Gaudium* – EG, no. 49), and "the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems" (EG, no. 47). Thus, the intercultural Christian community has a challenge to be converted to accept everyone. In this context, in the world, especially in Asia, interreligious dialogue plays a vital role (see EG, no. 250-254). "Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities. This dialogue is in first place a conversation about human existence or simply, as the bishops of India have put it, a matter of 'being open to them, sharing their joys and sorrows.' In this way we learn to accept others and their different ways of living, thinking and speaking" (EG, no. 250).

Interreligious dialogue is a task for all Christians; acknowledging the presence of the Spirit and finding the goodness in other religions is of paramount importance to build a peaceful community. Our positive attitudes and approach to other religions help to place trust with one another. "The horizon of dialogue for a Christian is not religion but God Himself" (Bongiovanni 2007, 174). Thus, interreligious dialogue is not just discussing, but allowing the Holy Spirit to act through us and finding a way for a peaceful community. This interaction and enrichment help build an intercultural community.

### Conclusion

Intercultural living and mission is not easy; this has to be learned. Truly committed persons can achieve this, and for a Christian community, interculturality has an authentic value. When we grow in enriching one another with our presence, cultures, and languages, we show that we can grow from a multicultural community to an intercultural community. The other cultures are not only respected, but we also learn from one another and work for transformation of persons in a community. When people in a locality live with

much animosity and hatred towards others, an intercultural community of Christians has a witness value. When we master the skills to overcome a conflict, and develop intercultural competence, we can go beyond the prejudices of other cultures. We can strive for open, grace-filled relationships among the various peoples and cultures and live in harmony.

The Christian communities which strive to grow in their faith and commitment, common vision, common projects (e.g., mission statement) and common orientation stimulate the vitality of each other. “Intercultural communities need to feel that they are all on the same side, working for common goals and the implementation of a common vision; this requires compassion and concern, and sometimes explicit encouragement rather than simply a lack of criticism” (Gittins 2015b, 71). The intercultural life is a sign of not just tolerance but a community of various cultures can live and work towards transformation of society; and this gives credibility to Christian communities especially in the post-pandemic period. The strength comes from our faith and commitment. In my view, every Christian community should strive to promote interculturality. This is a task and challenge, but it has richness and value.

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## The Task for Interreligious Dialogue post-COVID-19

*Robert Kisala, SVD*

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp relief some of the major problems of our world today—disparities in resources, the structural effects of historical discrimination and racism, false information, conspiracy theories, scapegoating, environmental destruction, among others. At the same time, at both the local and global level, it has highlighted the positive role of religious actors in dealing with current social issues and helped to promote interreligious understanding and cooperation. Looking ahead to the post-COVID-19 world, in this chapter I would like to raise four concerns that have come to the fore during the pandemic where religious actors working together can make a significant contribution: in promoting sound public policy that serves the common good, in battling scapegoating and a conspiratorial mindset, in building solidarity in order to address societal disparities, and in preservation of the environment.

Increasingly, interreligious dialogue is understood through the lens of a broad understanding of ‘dialogue.’ Although it has been decades since, taking a hint from Vatican documents, four aspects of interreligious dialogue have been identified, namely, the dialogue of theological exchange, the dialogue of life, the dialogue of common action, and the dialogue of religious experience, it is safe to say that the first thing that comes to mind when people think of interreligious dialogue is the doctrinal-based exchange of theological experts. Under Pope Benedict XVI there seems to have been a conscious moving away from this understanding of dialogue towards an intercultural dialogue that sought to identify common values, leading to common efforts to promote those values in the everyday life of all people. Pope Francis has continued in this vein, as can be seen in the definition of dialogue given in the *Document on Human Fraternity*

*for World Peace and Living Together*, issued jointly with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyed, during Francis' visit to Abu Dhabi in 2019:

Dialogue among believers means coming together in the vast space of spiritual, human and shared social values and, from here, transmitting the highest moral virtues that religions aim for. It also means avoiding unproductive discussions.<sup>1</sup>

It is in the light of this understanding of interreligious dialogue that I will be exploring the task of this dialogue in the post-COVID-19 world.

In 2020 the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID) published a booklet titled, *Interfaith Dialogue in Action: A Guide for Dealing with COVID-19* (Holden 2020). The KAICIID Dialogue Centre developed out of a meeting of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia and Pope Benedict XVI in 2007. In the climate of mistrust that grew in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, the two leaders met to discuss the possibilities of new interfaith initiatives in order to heal the world. Eventually, KAICIID developed a dual governance structure to bring together religious leaders and public policymakers. On the side of state governments, the Republic of Austria, the Kingdom of Spain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Holy See as an observer, form the Council of Parties, which approves the Centre's annual budget and projects. In addition, religious and community leaders from more than 20 countries form the Advisory Forum, which works with the Board of Directors to develop the Centre's programs and activities. The Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim traditions are represented in this forum. The Centre's mission is described as follows: "to create dialogue between people and communities who would not otherwise come into contact, but whose cooperation is essential to building sustainable, long-term solutions to global challenges."<sup>2</sup>

Introducing some interfaith efforts to address the COVID-19 pandemic, the guide offers five guiding principles for these efforts: create a culture of inclusion; express empathy and display solidarity across religions, regions, and cultures; strengthen charitable and service efforts; adapt behaviors, approaches, methodologies, and techniques to strengthen resilience; emphasize human

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190204\\_documento-fratellanza-umana.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html), accessed Feb 10, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> From the Centre's homepage: <https://www.kaiciid.org/who-we-are>. Last accessed on Feb. 16, 2022.

interconnectivity and interdependency (Holden 2020, 27). In speaking of the importance of interreligious dialogue for addressing situations of crisis, the guide argues that

Religious agencies and policymakers are focusing on how to engage constructively with each other and be more effective in responding to the pandemic. Interreligious dialogue work has become a tool of increasing importance in developing intercommunity trust, relations and cooperation in numerous sectors, such as development, environmental protection, and peacebuilding. It is integral to much interfaith work in general. In fragile contexts, particularly those currently experiencing conflict or dealing with the legacy of a conflict, interreligious dialogue has served to bridge communities and alleviate tensions. (Ibid, 6)

It is with this understanding of the contemporary importance of interreligious dialogue in mind that I will look at four tasks for that dialogue in the post-COVID-19 era.

### **Promoting Sound Public Policy that Serves the Common Good**

For some time now, public officials have sought to employ religious actors to promote public policy. These religious actors are seen as enjoying respect in the community, and thus in a unique position to influence public opinion towards support of current policy, if they can be brought onboard. For example, on the international level, Duncan McDuie-Ra and John A. Rees (2001) focused on the World Bank's engagement with religious actors to promote the bank's development activities worldwide, in order formulate some proposals for more profitable use of these religious actors.<sup>3</sup> Alexander Yendell (2021) and his coauthors focused specifically on the role of religious actors in the COVID-19 pandemic, pointing out both the positive (life-saving) and negative (life-threatening) effects of some of their activities.<sup>4</sup> Much attention has been given to the negative effects of some religious actors, such as church services

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<sup>3</sup> Accessed online at [https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=arts\\_article](https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=arts_article). Last accessed on Feb. 10, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Accessed online at [https://jlfllc.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ssoar-2021-yendell\\_et\\_al-The\\_Role\\_of\\_Religious\\_Actors.pdf](https://jlfllc.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ssoar-2021-yendell_et_al-The_Role_of_Religious_Actors.pdf). Last accessed on Feb. 10, 2022.

becoming super-spreader events, the refusal to follow public health authority guidelines, anti-vaccine activities, or some religious reasons given for the pandemic itself, such as it being God's judgment on humankind as a whole or some particular group. Ostling (2021), for example, presents the case of the Westboro Baptist Church, a relatively small evangelical group in the United States which has garnered much attention for some of their controversial, even outrageous, protest activities. In line with their strict interpretation of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, they preach that the pandemic has been planned by God from the beginning of time, and there is nothing that can be done to mitigate or stop it from running its course.

Yendell et al, however, focus on the positive activities of some religious actors, such as Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, a Buddhist-based NGO in Sri Lanka, which engaged in an awareness campaign regarding COVID-19, translating materials produced by the World Health Organization (WHO) into the native languages and making them widely available, in order to promote mitigation activities (2021, 62). Alternatively, Buddhist temples in Thailand opened almost 1,000 soup kitchens to feed those who had been adversely affected by the pandemic (Ibid, 65-66). Interreligious activities are also presented. For example, in northern Nigeria, OMNIA Interfaith Peacemaker teams cooperated with a local nursing college in visiting numerous surrounding villages to promote COVID-19 mitigation measures (Ibid, 70).

In addition to these initiatives on the part of religious actors, local authorities have also taken the initiative to employ these actors to promote public safety during the pandemic. For example, in a short study entitled *Interfaith Beyond the Pandemic: From London Communities to Global Identities*, Manmit Bhambra, Austin Tiffany, and James Walters look at interfaith activities during the pandemic in London and focus especially on the Places of Worship Taskforce established by London government authorities to explore how to reopen churches and other places of worship following the initial lockdown.

One particular area that religious actors can make a positive contribution during the pandemic is in combatting misinformation, especially conspiracy theories. Yendell et al, as well as Dyrendal and Hestad (2021), have pointed out how conspiracy theories are themselves a kind of religious belief, in that they present themselves as a way to understand the existence of evil (Ostling et al 10; Dyrendal and Hestad 99). As a result of their research, Dyrendal and Hestad point out that the conspiracy mindset correlates with a lack of trust in authority and with a positive tendency to believe in other conspiracy theories, even if they are contradictory (2021, 102-103). Since, generally, religions foster trust in some

benevolent presence in the universe, I would argue that religions have a unique role to play in countering the conspiracy mindset. In addition, Yendell et al, argue that “(conspiracy) theories must be addressed in a primarily emotional, emphatic and sociopsychological manner rather than a purely matter-of-fact, rational one” (Ibid, 10). This also serves to indicate the important role that religious actors can play in combatting conspiracy theories.

Finally, Yendell et al, make an interesting, and important, argument for why it is that religion is uniquely capable of helping in situations of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. They point out that religions, which seek to provide answers to the ultimate mysteries of life, have long developed the skill

of constructively dealing with the underlying ambivalences and ambiguities which are symptomatic of a crisis situation. From a sociological and psychological point of view, religions and religious communities, irrespective of their specific orientation, are most definitely suited to making a significant contribution to dealing individually and collectively with uncertainty as well as things which are rationally and scientifically inexplicable. (Ibid, 16)

In connection with this last point, although individual religious actors have made positive contributions during the pandemic, interfaith initiatives are particularly important. One reason for this is the tendency for religious thought to become authoritarian and intolerant of alternative opinions and convictions. The toleration of “contradictions between individual beliefs, religious conviction and empirical-scientific knowledge, or between theory and practice” (Ibid, 16) is something that must be cultivated, through interreligious dialogue.

### **Battling Scapegoating**

Numerous cases of scapegoating, sometimes connected with conspiracy theories, have been documented during the pandemic. Mention has already been made above of some religious gatherings becoming super-spreader events, leading to scapegoating. For example, some of the first cases in South Korea were traced back to a worship service held at the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in Daegu in mid-February 2020. ‘Patient 31’ was identified as a member of the church who had attended several crowded worship services before testing positive. Within weeks, the number of infections traced to the church had

ballooned to over 2,000, almost two-thirds of all the cases in South Korea at that time. Authorities demanded a list of all the members of the church, in line with tracing guidelines in effect at the time. Several lists were provided, with contradictory information, leading to accusations that the group was deliberately trying to confuse authorities. Public backlash against the group was so strong that there were even calls for the group to be disbanded. In an attempt to curb the criticism, the group's founder and leader, Lee Man-hee, went on television to make a public apology on behalf of the group, and called on members who had recovered from the virus to donate blood plasma, which could be used in the treatment of others who had the disease (Zeller 2021, 66-69).

Some super-spreader events also helped to fuel already present inter-ethnic tensions, such as the Tablighi Jamaat event in India. Tablighi Jamaat is an Islamic reform organization, which held a convention in Delhi in March 2020, just as the COVID-19 virus was beginning to spread in India. Several thousand people attended the conference, including several hundred from overseas, many of whom had entered India on tourist visas. On March 22, the national government enforced what was called a Janata curfew, a kind of trial lockdown that lasted for 14 hours. Immediately after the curfew Delhi was put in lockdown, which was extended to the whole country two days later. By the middle of April, over 4,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases were linked to the event by the health ministry, representing one-third of all confirmed cases in India at that point. Eventually more than 40,000 people who had attended the event or had been identified as a close contact had been put in quarantine throughout the country. Rumors spread about bad, even criminal, behavior while in quarantine, such as assaulting or spitting at staff or throwing urine-filled bottles in order to further spread the virus. It was not too long before these rumors transformed into conspiracy theories about a Muslim 'corona jihad' whose purpose was to wipe out Hindus (Froystad 2021, 15). Criminal cases were filed against attendees of the event across the country, and in a landmark decision, some of the indictments were thrown out by the Bombay High Court in August 2020. In dismissing the charges, the court specifically claimed that the government was trying to find scapegoats.<sup>5</sup>

Scapegoating was not limited to religious events that were later identified as super-spreaders. In August 2020 more than 60 members of the rugby team at a university in Japan tested positive for the COVID-19 virus. The team and the

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<sup>5</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/tablighi-jamaat-case-firs-bombay-hc-coronavirus-6565460/>. Last accessed on Feb 11, 2022.

university became the target of attacks, demanding that they apologize publicly for the fact that they had caught the disease. Students from the university were told to go home when they showed up for work at the shops and restaurants in the area, even if they had had no direct contact with the team.

Much more dangerous was the scapegoating of Chinese, and by extension Asians in general, in the United States. The adoption of the moniker ‘Chinese virus’ by some politicians and commentators, including, famously, the then president of the country, fueled a notable increase in hate crimes against people of Asian descent, including assaults and even murder.<sup>6</sup>

The Tablighi Jamaat case in India, presented above, has already illustrated how scapegoating can morph into conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19 have been rampant and varied. Some claim that the virus itself does not exist, and claims that it does exist mask some nefarious purpose on the part of governments or other actors. Others surround the origin of the virus. Still others regard mitigation efforts or vaccines. Oftentimes religious groups will be the target of conspiracy theories, as in the case of Muslims in India. Unfortunately, some politicians associated with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party took advantage of the misinformation being circulated to call for a boycott of businesses operated by Muslims. In addition to this added economic burden, Muslims were also often denied access to testing and treatment for the virus (Yendell et al, 77-78). In Turkey it was Jews who became the target of conspiracy theories regarding the origin of the virus. The pro-government television station ATV, for example, gave voice to the view that the fact that Israel was early in developing a vaccine indicates that Israel was also the source of the virus, since whoever spread the virus would have the knowledge necessary to develop a vaccine as well. The theory further elaborated that since it was Jews who owned the pharmaceutical companies, they were the ones who would now make huge profits on the vaccine (Ibid, 78).

Conversely, some religious groups were also instrumental in propagating conspiracy theories in connection with the virus. The Orthodox Church in Moldova, for example, already in May 2020, condemned the possible use of vaccines against the virus as a satanic plot “to introduce microchips into people’s bodies with whose help they can control them, through 5G technology” (Ibid, 75). In Greece, Orthodox leaders bought into another common conspiracy theory that tissue from aborted fetuses was used in the development of the vaccine (Ibid, 76). Likewise, in Cyprus the Orthodox bishop

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56218684>. Last accessed on Feb. 11, 2022.

claimed that the vaccine was a genetically modified product of the new world order, and that those who took the vaccine would lose their sense of taste (Ibid).

Some prominent Catholics have also bought into various conspiracy theories during the pandemic. Carlo Maria Vigano, the former papal nuncio to the United States and a very vocal critic of Pope Francis, for example, is one of those who claims that the COVID-19 virus does not exist.<sup>7</sup> Some US cardinals, including Raymond Burke, are anti-vaccine, associating the vaccine with the implantation of microchips into the body.<sup>8</sup> In Kenya, Catholic bishops have been generally against vaccines since 2014, claiming that they are secretly laced with materials to curb population growth, and this suspicion of vaccines in general has extended to COVID-19 vaccines as well (Melillo et al 2021, 24, 67).

Conversely, as we have seen above, religious actors with a positive attitude towards the scientific method can make an important contribution in promoting mitigating measures against the virus, including vaccination. I use ‘the scientific method’ here rather than ‘scientific knowledge’ in order to indicate that science is fundamentally a method, and not a body of knowledge. One of the problems as the pandemic developed worldwide was changing, and sometimes contradictory, advice given by authorities in response to COVID-19. This was due to the fact that the world was dealing with a new, and therefore, unknown virus, and public policy had to continually adapt as the body of knowledge regarding the virus grew. “Effects of faith actor engagement in the uptake and coverage of immunization in low- and middle-income countries,” a series of PowerPoint slides developed by Sara Melillo, Doug Fountain, Mona Bormet, and Carolyn O’Brien for USAid and Momentum: A Global Partnership for Health and Resilience, illustrates the critical role that religious actors can play in the acceptance of vaccines. The authors of this study point out that religious factors are the third most frequently cited reason for vaccine hesitancy worldwide (2021, 16). To overcome this hesitancy, the authors suggest that health officials work with religious scholars to examine sacred texts in order to use specifically religious argumentation to promote vaccines, work with global faith actors to educate clergy and other leaders on the local level, and work towards a long-term partnership with religious actors (Ibid, 42).

However, one further lesson from the pandemic is that religious actors should not take at face-value all that is presented as scientific knowledge. The

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<sup>7</sup> [https://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2021/11/10/vigano-says-covid-doesnt-exist-paglia-dismayed\\_fd04b651-9bc5-4b26-9aac-4e4f48995c28.html](https://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2021/11/10/vigano-says-covid-doesnt-exist-paglia-dismayed_fd04b651-9bc5-4b26-9aac-4e4f48995c28.html). Last accessed Feb. 12, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/raymond-leo-cardinal-burke-catholic-ventilator-covid-19-misinformation/>. Last accessed Feb. 12, 2022.

notion of “herd immunity” promoted by some scientists during the pandemic cautions religious actors to evaluate what is presented as a scientific approach in terms of values and morality. Yendell et al, use the case of Sweden as an example. Under the influence of Sweden’s state epidemiologist, Sweden initially did not adopt the rather drastic lockdown measures that were employed almost universally in Europe early in the pandemic. Instead, the choice was made to try to maintain a balance between infection rates and normal activity, to protect high-risk groups while allowing moderate levels of infections in low-risk groups, thus preventing the healthcare system from being overwhelmed while continuing relatively high levels of economic activity. It soon became apparent, however, that relatively large numbers of the aged living in seniors’ residences and nursing homes, as well as migrants living in the poorer suburbs of Stockholm were dying from the disease. The leader of the Catholic Church, Cardinal Anders Arborelius, publicly opposed government policy, on the grounds that the pandemic was inordinately affecting the most vulnerable in society (Yendell et al, 59-60).

### **Addressing Disparities in Society**

Rebecca Duncan and Johan Hoglund make mention of the fact that, early in the pandemic, across a rainbow sign taped to the window of the Prime Minister’s residence at 10 Downing Street in London were written the words “we are all in this together,” in order to indicate that the sentiment expressed there was far from the truth (Duncan and Hoglund 2021, 117). In fact, the pandemic served to bring into clear focus the disparities that marked society at both the local and global levels. As Duncan and Hoglund point out, studies have already shown that the virus disproportionately affects women, people of color, and colonial and neocolonial populations. Studies from the United States and the United Kingdom show higher rates of mortality among racial minorities. Other studies have shown that secondary (economic) effects are concentrated in formerly colonial regions of the world (Ibid, 115).

Duncan and Hoglund argue that centuries of racism, ethnocentrism, and discrimination are built into the structure of modern society, producing a situation of ‘structural violence.’ On the global level, affluent societies in the Global North are better able to provide state-of-the-art medical services and to buffer some of the secondary effects of the pandemic on businesses and the economy. At the local level, even in the Global North access to healthcare is

uneven and economic hardships are primarily felt by women, children, and immigrants. As has been well reported, cases of domestic violence against women and children have also increased during the pandemic.

Finally, the same authors talk about a ‘vaccine apartheid’ where affluent nations are preparing to vaccinate their population twice a year for the foreseeable future, while vaccines have barely reached the Global South (Ibid, 128). In conclusion they write: “The message then is clear, ‘we’ are not all in this together. However, this does not mean that solidarities cannot be forged across the inequities that COVID-19 has highlighted and intensified” (Ibid, 128).

Pope Francis has also talked extensively about the disparities in society that have been highlighted by the pandemic. In *Let Us Dream*, a book written by Austen Ivereigh based on conversations and correspondence with Pope Francis, the pope presents his reflections on the current pandemic. The theme that runs throughout the book is that it is now time to envision a different world order:

Right now I see a lot of digging in. The people most invested in the current way of doing things are doing just that. There are leaders talking about making a few adjustments here and there, but they’re basically advocating for the same system as before. When they talk of ‘recovery’ they mean putting a bit of varnish on the future, touching up the paintwork here and there, but all to make sure that nothing changes. I’m convinced that this will lead to an even greater failure, one that could ignite a huge social explosion. (Pope Francis 2020, 36)

Aspirations for building a more just global society post-COVID-19 are incorporated into a document issued jointly by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the World Council of Churches, “Serving a Wounded World in Interreligious Solidarity: A Christian Call to Reflection and Action During COVID-19 and Beyond” (2020).<sup>9</sup> Taking note of the pain and suffering brought about by the unexpected pandemic, the document makes special notice of the disparities highlighted by the pandemic:

While the whole of humanity is gravely wounded, the pandemic has reminded us of the scandalous gap between the rich and the poor,

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<sup>9</sup> The document can be found at [https://press.vatican.va/content/dam/salastampa/it/bollettino/documentazione-linkata/ServingWoundedWorld\\_.pdf](https://press.vatican.va/content/dam/salastampa/it/bollettino/documentazione-linkata/ServingWoundedWorld_.pdf).

between the privileged and the underprivileged. In many places, the sick, the elderly and the disabled have suffered most grievously, often with little or no medical care. It has exacerbated racial prejudices and led to increased violence against those who have for long been considered a threat to the dominant body politic that is structured and sustained by systems of inequality, exclusivism, discrimination and domination. People on the margins, especially migrants, refugees and prisoners, have been most affected by this pandemic. (Ibid, 6)

The document calls for “new forms of solidarity,” particularly interreligious cooperation, to address these issues and build a more just world (2020, 7). The document concludes by offering seven recommendations: (1) find ways of bearing witness to suffering, and holding accountable the people and structures behind this suffering; (2) promote a culture of inclusivism which celebrates difference as God’s gift; (3) nurture solidarity through spirituality; (4) widen the formation of believers to equip them with the knowledge and tools to work for a wounded humanity; (5) engage and support young people; (6) create space for dialogues, so that different groups can grow in love and understanding and marginalized voices can be heard and respected; (7) restructure projects and processes for interreligious solidarity which affirms diversity (Ibid, 18-19).

### **Protecting the Environment**

While the origins of the COVID-19 virus are still unknown, one common theory is that it was spread from bats, through an intermediary species, to humans in the ‘wet market’ in the Chinese city of Wuhan. Duncan and Hoglund argue that this illustrates the connection between the pandemic and the current environmental crisis. Widespread deforestation enacted across Southeast Asia by large multinationals has led to both closer contact between wildlife and human communities as well as a loss of biodiversity that has led to the channeling of pathogens directly towards humans. Quoting another author, they say that unrestrained capitalism violently shakes the trees where bats and animals live, and “out falls a drizzle of viruses” (Duncan and Hoglund, 120). Elsewhere they point out that, while the pandemic has not caused the environmental crisis, it has accelerated it, and the two are intimately intertwined in the capitalistic exploitation of vulnerable populations as well as the environment (Ibid, 116-117).

Care for vulnerable populations—the elderly, sick, handicapped, youth, immigrants—as well as the environment, are central concerns of Pope Francis. And the two concerns are connected in his encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si*. In the introduction to the document, he announces that one of the themes he will be returning to repeatedly will be “the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet” (no. 16). In Chapter One, his presentation of the problem, he says,

We have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. (no. 49)

This thought is developed further in Chapter Four, “Integral Ecology”:

It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems. We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature. (no. 139)

Finally, he makes a call for an interreligious response to the crisis:

The majority of people living on our planet profess to be believers. This should spur religions to dialogue among themselves for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of respect and fraternity. (no. 201)

In this way protection of the environment cannot be separated from the work of addressing disparities in society which was treated in the previous section. And, once again, here interreligious cooperation is essential in order to present an integral, value-based solution to the problem.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic will, no doubt, be the defining experience for the several generations now living through it. The trauma of the loss of life and limited personal contact, lives disrupted and plans that had to be abandoned, economic and financial strains, the tears in the fabric of society, will be with us for many years to come. A comprehensive approach to dealing with this trauma will necessarily involve spiritual resources. For that reason, I have tried here to present four areas that would be enriched by a common interfaith presentation of these spiritual resources: promoting sound public policy that serves the common good, battling all forms of scapegoating, addressing the disparities and inequalities in society, and protecting the environment. I would like to conclude with the words of Pope Francis, from his most recent encyclical on fraternity and social friendship, *Fratelli Tutti*:

All too quickly, however, we forget the lessons of history, ‘the teacher of life.’ Once this health crisis passes, our worst response would be to plunge even more deeply into feverish consumerism and new forms of egotistic self-preservation. God willing, after all this, we will think no longer in terms of “them” and “those”, but only “us”. If only this may prove not to be just another tragedy of history from which we learned nothing. If only we might keep in mind all those elderly persons who died for lack of respirators, partly as a result of the dismantling, year after year, of healthcare systems. If only this immense sorrow may not prove useless, but enable us to take a step forward towards a new style of life. If only we might rediscover once for all that we need one another, and that in this way our human family can experience a rebirth, with all its faces, all its hands and all its voices, beyond the walls that we have erected. (no. 35)

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## The COVID-19 Pandemic from Ecological Perspectives: The ‘Prophet’ SARS-CoV-2

*Michael Q. Nguyen, SVD*

In the last days of 2019, the news about a novel coronavirus in Wuhan, China suddenly appeared in the headlines of countless newspapers and social media across the globe. The virus was transmitted rapidly among people and then spread quickly to many countries in the world. In March 2020, governments of many nations responded to the threat posed by the novel coronavirus by shutting down international borders and issued various restrictions to major cities in their countries. The Church was not exempt from the attack of the deadly virus, for countless churches throughout the world celebrated Lent and Easter 2020 via zoom. The virus known as SARS-CoV-2 has arrived since 2019 and is expected to stay with humanity just like the Influenza virus that was first identified in 1918 in Spain. This chapter from ecological perspectives treats the SARS-CoV-2 virus like a prophet in the Old Testament. Employing the term “ecological conversions” from Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’*, the author suggests several conversions to the faithful as practical approaches in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### COVID-19 and Ecology

Medical doctors in Wuhan in December 2019 encountered patients who had suffered from a disease caused by a novel coronavirus. Scientists later named it the SARS-CoV-2 virus because it was related to the SARS virus that broke out in 2003. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020.

Due to the rapid transmission of the deadly virus, the government of Wuhan imposed lockdown restrictions in the entire city. After WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic, nations across the continents issued partial or complete lockdown restrictions to their major cities, imposed social distancing measures among people, and closed their international borders.

Up to the present, how the SARS-CoV-2 virus was brought to life remains unknown. Who was the first person to contract the virus, and in what circumstances this individual was infected are still the two unsolved issues. Although the cause of the pandemic remains unclear, its impacts on the environment are rather visible. Due to the anthropause, i.e., sudden suspensions of all social, industrial, economic, urbanization activities, the earth had an unexpected opportunity to improve its natural life which could be observed in the quality of the atmosphere and the appearance of wild animals in some public places.

Indeed, in 2020, after people were forced to shelter at home, according to the Global Carbon Project, the global CO<sub>2</sub> emission in the atmosphere dropped by about 7 percent. In the US, the level of CO<sub>2</sub> emission went down by 13 percent, in particular, in the early part of April, when the US and many nations across the globe had begun imposing restrictions in their cities (Climate Central 2021). In the middle of March 2020, after being locked down for several days, the level of emission in New York City dropped by 50 percent in comparison to the same period of 2019. Similarly, due to the lockdowns since the first days of 2020, air pollution in China decreased by 25 percent. In 337 cities of China, since lockdown, the rate of the days with good air quality went up by 11.4 percent. In Europe, after lockdowns were enforced, satellites captured images showing nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) gradually disappearing over the urban areas in Northeast of Italy, Spain, and England (Henriques 2020). Specifically, from March 13 to April 13, 2020, the level of NO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere over Madrid, Rome, Milan dropped by 45 percent, and Paris by 54 percent in comparison to the period between March and April of 2019 (Bar 2021). Nevertheless, researchers discovered that after the restrictions to human activity were lifted, the level of CO<sub>2</sub> emission quickly returned to its normal rate (Climate Central).

In addition, when various restrictions were imposed, there were numerous reports on social media from all around the globe about wild animals roaming freely on the roads and in public places. One of the reasons that accounted for this phenomenon was that when members of the human race were confined, wild animals, for instance, deer, birds, monkeys were not hiding anymore but came out and made use of spaces usually occupied by humanity. During the

lockdown period, dolphins were seen getting closer to the shore in Trieste, Italy, as all fishing activities were suspended; and pumas were seen wandering on the roads in Santiago, Chile due to humans having to shelter at home.

Scientists have studied the relationship between people and wild animals to find out whether human presence has certain impacts on wild animals. The COVID-19 pandemic has partially provided answers to this question. Empirical observations during the anthropause show that when human beings are removed from the environment, wild animals are able to enjoy their freedom and their lives the way they should (Walsh 2020).

### **To Till and To Care: The Shepherd – The Sheep**

These two particular phenomena observed during the lockdown period invite theologians to reflect again on the relationship between the human race and the rest of creation.

Christianity believes that all creation including human beings are created by the Lord God. God sees them good and blesses them all. Humanity, the Earth, and the rest of creation therefore have their own values and are significant in God's eyes. God nevertheless selects humanity for a mission. To prepare people for this mission, God creates human beings in God's image. They also receive God's breath of life. Finally, the Lord God creates a garden and then places humanity in it for this divine mission: "to till and to care" the garden or the Earth (Gen. 2:15). "To till" the garden implies cultivating the Earth, so the planet not only retains its original beauty but also flourishes with abundant resources. "To care" in this context requires people, who receive a mission from God, to look after and respect the integrity of all creation. Leonardo Boff thus believes people should have been friends of nature and played the roles of guardian angels of the earth in the first place (Ruether 2001, 231-232).

Nevertheless, many people still believe that the human race is the master entrusted with dominion over all creatures on the globe (Ibid). This misconception might have been due to inaccurate interpretation of this Bible verse: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth'" (Gen. 1:26). The phrase "have dominion" appears again in v. 28. Relying on Gen. 1:26, 28, some are convinced that human beings are given absolute power over all other beings.

Consequently, people have constructed a society based on the model of ‘Master and Slaves.’ In this model, every entity including the Earth revolves around the human race. This model of ‘Master and Slave’ promotes the ‘belief’ that all things are created for the benefit of the human race. In this model, humanity is the absolute master, who has the ultimate voice. The rest, on the other hand, has no voice. Put differently, the Earth and the rest of creation are voiceless, for they are slaves to the human race.

Since the mid-twentieth century, and amid the challenges of global climate change, ecology has emerged as a developing discipline that raises awareness of the sacredness of creation and emphasizes the interconnection between humanity and Mother Earth (Edwards 2016, 377-391). “Ecology...is concerned...with relations” (Tauchner 2016, 180). Consequently, ecology urges every single individual on the globe to re-examine the way he/she views and acts toward creation (USCCB 2001). All created beings, for instance, bees, ants, grass, forests, and hills on earth have their own functions in balancing the life on earth.

In its own context, the phrase “have dominion” of Gen. 1:26, 28 does not support the model of ‘Master and Slave,’ but rather ‘Shepherd and Sheep’ of Psalm 23. In the model of ‘Master and Slave,’ the master is the only one who has the voice and makes the final decision. Slaves and their lives are treated as means to serve master’s needs. Nevertheless, in the model of ‘Shepherd and Sheep,’ the shepherd and the sheep are situated in mutually loving and caring relationships. The shepherd thus does not use or manipulate the sheep for his own selfish agenda but looks after the sheepfold in all aspects.

Viewing the phrase “have dominion” under the lens of Psalms 23 and Ecology, when people are created in God’s image (Gen. 1:26, 27), receive the breath of life from God (Gen 2:7), placed in the garden (Gen. 2:15), the human race received a mission from God. That is, on behalf of God, human beings ought to take care of all other entities and cultivate the Earth. In other words, by “nature,” God loves all creation. God blesses them all. On the seventh day of the creation week, God rests and commissions the human race “to care” and “to till” God’s creation.

Thus, we will not be surprised to notice that the Lord God forbids the Hebrews to force not only people but also the ox, donkey, and any of the livestock to work on the Sabbath (Exo. 23:12, Deut. 5:14). In addition, God commands the Hebrews to respect the integrity of the Earth by giving a resting year to the vineyard and the olive orchard every seventh year (Exo. 23:11-12). In this year, whatever grows in these plots of land will become food for people

and also the wild animals living on the lands (Lev. 25:4-7). Concerning the fruits, the Hebrews are allowed to enjoy only fruits from the tree that has already reached five years old (Lev. 19:23-25). While an ox is treading out the grains, the owner is forbidden to muzzle the ox (Deut. 25:4). Farmers are not allowed to pair an ox with a donkey to plow the field, for the unbalance in the two bodies will create a burden on both animals (Deut. 22:10).

In the Gospel, Jesus also preaches about the love of God for animals and flowers. According to Jesus, all creation is significant to God. Even five sparrows which are worth only two pennies, God will not forget their existence (Luke 12:6). To the human eyes, sparrows do not have much value. Nevertheless, none of them fall to the ground without God's knowledge (Matt. 10:29). Furthermore, Jesus through the Beatitudes reveals that God is the one who provides food for all the birds in the sky (Matt. 6:26). While arguing with the Jewish leaders about the Sabbath rules, Jesus reminds them that even an ox and a donkey are untied on the Sabbath, so their owner can lead them to the water basin for quenching their thirst (Luke 13:15). Jesus also compares the image of a man's son with his ox. If both accidentally fall into a pit, Jesus asserts that both will be rescued by the father even on the Sabbath (Luke 14:5). Even the grass and the lilies in the field are taken care and adorned by God to the extent that Solomon "in all his glory was not clothed like one of these" (Luke 12:27-28).

### **Interconnectedness**

While conversing with Nicodemus, Jesus discloses to the Jewish leader the reason the mystery of the Incarnation takes place in salvation history. That is, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). Before ascending to heaven, the resurrected Lord commissions His disciples to "go into all the world and proclaim the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15). In the Koine Greek version of John 3:16, the evangelist employs the term *kosmos*, meaning 'the world.' The evangelist of the Fourth Gospel repeats similar theology in the next verse: "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). Simply put, the evangelist states rather clearly that the world is the object to which God the Father sends the only Son.

And due to the agapic love for the world, God desires to save the world from corruption. Human beings are not the only creatures in the world. In addition, the Good News is understood as *to* people and *for* the human souls. Nevertheless, the risen Lord in the Marcan Gospel extends the range of the receivers of the Good News. The Good News, according to the Lord, is not limited to humanity but *pasē tē ktísei* (all creation).

“All creation” in Mark 16:15 undoubtedly includes all of God’s creation - dogs, cats, chickens, bees, ants, butterflies, fish, grass, forests, and mountains, etc. Put differently, people, animals, plants, lands, mountains, to name some, all share with one another the garden in Genesis 2:15, the “common home” for all creation (*Laudato Si’*, no. 1). Hence, in *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis mentions St. Francis Assisi, who “communed with all creation, even preaching to the flowers, inviting them ‘to praise the Lord’” (no. 11). Ecology therefore asserts that all creation on Earth or the Common Home are interrelated. In short, “the basic concept of nature seen from an ecological standpoint is that everything is related to everything else in all respects” (Boff 1995, 10).

Adopting the worldview of interconnectedness has been a way of life of the Australian Aborigines. This cultural sensibility is reflected in their proverb, “I am, because we are.” “We are” in the Aboriginal mindset implies not only people but all creation – animals, plants, mountains and hills, sky, and spirits, to name a few. After hunting down a kangaroo, the Aborigines share the meat with their neighbors. The kangaroo bones with whatever remains on them will be left in the open field as food for all animals in the desert. In addition, the desert people in Central Australia only pick and consume the ripest fruits on a tree, and leave the rest for those who arrive later. The hills and the mountains in the Aboriginal eyes are the homes of mountain spirits. Those sacred places should be therefore respected, which explains why it is not recommended that tourists climb to the top of Uluru/Ayers Rock in the Red Centre. In their belief, the sun has its own spirit as does the moon. These two spirits take turns in providing light to all creation both day and night (Stanner 1976, 19-35).

Regarding the way the Aboriginal people care for the environment, during his visit to the Aboriginal people in Alice Springs, Pope John Paul II reminded the Aborigines that,

For thousands of years this culture of yours was free to grow without interference by people from other places. You lived your lives in spiritual closeness to the land, with its animals, birds, fishes, waterholes, rivers, hills and mountains. Through your closeness to the land you

touched the sacredness of human relationship with God, for the land was the proof of a power in life greater than yourselves. You did not spoil the land, use it up, exhaust it, and then walk away from it. You realized that your land was related to the source of life. (Pope John Paul II 1986)

Similar to the Australian Aborigines, the Native Americans also developed a nomadic culture since the first days of their settlement in North America. Living a nomadic life, the Native Americans also relied on food provided by God in the vast fields of the continent. One of the many implications of this nomadic culture is the mindset of interconnectedness that the Native Americans had towards the rest of creation. Chief Seattle of the tribes Suquamish and Duwamish had a famous saying, “People did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.” It means that when people release toxic chemicals into the ocean, they are not only destroying the environment of the fish but also of the human race and other living things.

A concrete example of this interconnectedness is the acid rain resulting from human industrial activities. These activities cause sulfur oxide (SO<sub>2</sub>) and nitrogen oxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) to be released into the atmosphere, which then mix with oxygen and other chemicals to form acidic pollutants or acid rain. Through rain, sleet, snow, fog, these acidic pollutants will find their way to vegetable farms, streams, lakes, rivers, marshes. When people consume the vegetables, fish and wild animals from these contaminated farms, streams, lakes, rivers, and marshes, they will be at risk for respiratory illnesses (Boff, 16).

### **Master and Slave: Emission in the Atmosphere**

Unfortunately, since the first days of the Industrial Revolution, people have accelerated the process of constructing society based on the model of ‘Master and Slave.’ People have thus destroyed more forests, built more urban cities and industrial zones, and released more toxic chemicals into the rivers and oceans. In short, people after the Revolution have accelerated treating animals, plants, and the Earth as slaves whose existences are exclusively for the benefit of the human race.

The upshot of this model is that the level of emissions in the atmosphere is increasing. Scientists discovered that since the Industrial Revolution, the

presence of CO<sub>2</sub> in the air exceeds allowable annual limit. These excessive emissions come from industrial activities, vehicles on the road, aviation, deforestation, and cattle farming, etc. While the activities from industries and transportations making use of fossil fuel create carbon dioxide, nitrous dioxide, and fluorinated gas (HFCs, PFCs, SF<sub>6</sub>, NF<sub>3</sub>), the farming activities produce methane (CH<sub>4</sub>), and deforestation destroys vast forests, which serve as the lungs of the earth by absorbing CO<sub>2</sub>. The statistics of the global emissions recorded in 2018 are: 81 percent carbon dioxide, 10 percent methane, 7 percent nitrous dioxide, and 3 percent fluorinated gas (EPA 2018).

In the last several decades, the digital revolution of the internet and social media has transformed the world into a global village. In addition, the slogan “everything is for progress” justifies speeding up all human daily activities. More industrial zones lead to more automobiles running on the many newly constructed freeways and more jumbo airplanes flying in the air. Humanity thus destroys more forests. Wild animals lose more habitats. Rivers and oceans become dumping grounds for toxic chemicals.

Nothing could stop human ambition and their slogan ‘Everything is for human progress’ until the moment the SARS-CoV-2 virus appeared in Wuhan. Very quickly, the invisible SARS-CoV-2 turned the situation around, for the human race was no longer playing the role of the powerful master. Wherever the coronavirus strain entered, the human race was forced to retreat into their homes. Since human were confined, their daily activities were virtually suspended. Since the human race was no longer ‘roaming’ on earth, the level of air pollutants began decreasing. Finally, this level dropped significantly in the final days of 2020 (Bar, 8165-8168).

Theologians believe the world will only change when it is no longer viewed from the center’s perspectives but those of the periphery. As discussed above, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the model of ‘Master and Slave’ was the one that the human race employed to operate their world. Nevertheless, the arrival of the novel coronavirus changed most of the daily routines and activities. Put differently, the world changed because humanity came under the rule of a newly established ruler, the SARS-CoV-2 virus. One of the many upshots of the appearance of the new ‘regime’ is that air pollution remarkably decreased.

## ‘Prophet’ SARS-CoV-2

Viewing the pandemic under the theological lens, the global crisis COVID-19 can be interpreted as an event through which God is sending a message to the human race. And the coronavirus is playing the role like that of a prophet in the Old Testament. As the pandemic is not over at the time of this writing, two images of prophets that the SARS-CoV-2 virus can be compared with are Jonah and Amos.

The prophet Jonah was sent by God to announce God’s verdict to the citizens of Nineveh. Receiving the message of doom from Jonah, the Ninevites changed their ways of life. The conversion surprisingly caused God to change God’s mind. Thus, God decided not to destroy the human lives in the city anymore. If viewing the SARS-CoV-2 virus as the prophet Jonah, the virus is an awakening call to all citizens on the globe. If the human race does not turn around and commence to undergo an ecological conversion by changing their daily activities based on the model of ‘Master and Slave’ to the model of ‘Shepherd and Sheep,’ the human race will face extinction!

In the role like the prophet Amos, the virus that causes COVID-19 functions as the prophet of doom. In the Old Testament, Amos sternly reprimands the people of the Northern Kingdom Israel, who “sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals — they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way” (Amos 2:6-7). Thus, Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti* asserts, “If everything is connected, it is hard to imagine that this global disaster is unrelated to our way of approaching reality, our claim to be absolute masters of our own lives and of all that exists... The world is itself crying out in rebellion” (no. 34).

Before the COVID-19, people were aware of climate change and its consequences. Nevertheless, due to enormous benefits to individuals and countries, people still accelerated the process of constructing more industrial zones, more super-freeways, and more megacities. The sour fruits of the so-called ‘progress’ are that there are more and more cities on the globe where the air is highly polluted due to the presence of excessive emission of chemicals in the atmosphere. The measurements of AQI (Air Quality Index) in the megacities in Vietnam and China, for instance, often reached alarming colors.<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> AQI is divided into six categories. Each has a range of number, color and level of concern. The values of index between 0-50 have green color and are good; between 51-100 are yellow and moderate, between 101-150 are orange and unhealthy for sensitive groups, 151-200 are red and unhealthy, 201-300 is purple and very unhealthy, 301 and higher are maroon and hazardous.

AQI in Hanoi at 6:30 am on Dec 13, 2019 was 333 with the color of maroon, which meant that the level of pollution was hazardous. At the same time, the AQI in Saigon was 166 (red color) with the level of concern being unhealthy (Hà Mai 2019). The AQI of Beijing at 8 pm on Jan 1, 2013 was 755, maroon color and the level of concern as hazardous (Nguyễn Thành Duy 2013).

Based on these statistics, one notices the value of Chief Seattle's saying about 'the web of life.' When destroying a component of the web, people also do damages to the whole web of life. In treating the Earth as its own possession, humanity becomes a tyrant to Mother Earth and the rest of creation. "The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 2). The cry of Mother Earth and the rest reached to heaven.

God sent the prophet Jonah to Nineveh, for God said, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me" (Jonah 1:2). Likewise, the prophet Amos was sent to the Northern Kingdom to announce the message of doom to its citizens, because God could not ignore the transgressions of the Israelites anymore (Amos 2:6). Similarly, because "the world is itself crying out in rebellion" (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 35) due to human oppression, the prophet SARS-CoV-2 appeared on the globe in the last days of 2019.

To avoid following in the footsteps of the citizens of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, humanity, in particular Christians, must begin the process of *metanoia* just like the Ninevites, who changed their ways of life after receiving the divine message from the prophet Jonah. This conversion can be manifested through imitating the Aboriginal way of life, living a Green Church, extending the objects of Caritas, and living interconnectedly.

### **The Aboriginal Way of Life**

Amid the threat from climate change, the Aboriginal wisdom 'I am because we are' and their model of respecting all forms of creation have surfaced to greater attention. The Australian Aborigines teach their children not to harvest all fruits on a tree, not to destroy plants, forests, hills, mountains for one's benefit, not to hunt kangaroos and other animals as a sport, but respect the integrity of all animals, plants, and their habitats. In the north of the Northern Territory, where there are plenty of crocodiles living in the rivers, the Aborigines teach their children not to enter the rivers but respect the crocodiles' territory. Living with

this ecological mindset has enabled the Aborigines to survive in Australia for 40,000 years. Moreover, their wisdom confirms the theology that God does not create only humanity. Plants, animals, birds, fish, ants, bees, insects are all neighbors of human beings. If humans do not respect their neighbors' lives, this can, in fact, result in the extinction of the human race itself. The 'prophet' SARS-CoV-2 has sent out this message of doom through the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **The Green Church**

If Christians believe that humanity has been entrusted to act on behalf of God; that the human race has been commissioned with the sacred task of cultivating and taking care of all of God's creation; that God sent the only Son to the world to save the world; that Jesus sent his disciples to preach the Good News to all creation, Christians must change their views toward creation. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis declares that the faithful must undergo an ecological conversion for the benefit of all creation. In other words, the Church in the contemporary world must be a Green Church. To construct this Green Church, the leaders and the laity must become green leaders and green laity living in green parishes. The Church, according to the Pope, must be a Church that is friendly with the environment.

This chapter suggests two ways to undergo the ecological conversion called for by Pope Francis - Extending Objects of Caritas and Interconnectedness.

#### **Extending Objects of Caritas**

In the ordinary sense of Caritas, the faithful understand that Caritas focuses on and deals with the agapic love that God has towards humanity, especially the unfortunate in society. However, if recognizing that God loves all creation, ecological conversion calls for Caritas be extended to entities beyond human beings. The effects that the COVID-19 pandemic displayed in regard to climate change and environmental well-being demonstrate the need for objects of Caritas be extended to all creation. In this sense, Caritas aims not only to humanity, but also to animals, plants, and other entities on the globe. God created the world and granted to every individual entity on earth its own integrity. In short, humanity has human integrity so do the rest of the creation. Therefore, the faithful must also respect the integrity of all creation as well as

return to the sacred task commissioned by God in the garden, i.e., love and care for animals, plants, and the environment.

### **Interconnectedness**

The wisdom of the Australian Aborigines and the Native Americans have indicated that all creation on Earth is interconnected. Their sense of interconnectedness has enabled them to survive in Australia and North America for thousands of years. If humanity does not respect other creatures on earth and keeps destroying the natural environment to serve their selfish needs, as Chief Seattle said, they are also destroying their own lives.

The model for living out this sense of interconnectedness can be found in the life of St. Francis of Assisi. In the spirit of interconnectedness, St. Francis called the Sun, Wind, Fire as brothers, and the Moon, Water as sisters. He also showed his love for animals by commanding his Franciscan brothers to leave a piece of the land untouched as a dwelling place for wild animals in the area.

### **Conclusion**

The dialogue between God and human beings through the COVID-19 pandemic is not over. The COVID-19 messages that God sends to humanity continue to be decoded by theologians. This chapter suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic is an event through which the Holy Spirit challenges the faithful concerning the model of 'Master and Slave' that humanity is operating on earth. The faithful must undergo an ecological conversion which will restore humans to their mission in the garden. Humanity, therefore, on behalf of God, must cultivate the earth and look after all creation just like the shepherd cares for his sheep in Psalm 23.

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# **Religious Leaders and Social Media: Religious Communication during and post- Pandemic**

*Anthony Le Duc, SVD*

## **Leadership in the Face of Crisis**

Good leadership is always needed in human society and is even more so during times of calamity and crisis. The future of a country or an organization greatly depends on the quality of its leadership, and a crisis can make or break a leader. The coronavirus pandemic presented opportunities and challenges for leaders of all types – political, religious, social, business – to demonstrate their ability to lead during one of the most devastating and widespread calamities in the last 100 years. One can see that many could not rise to the challenge as their wisdom, strength and other leadership skills were shown to be lacking, leading to tremendous tolls on their communities and countries.

Like many issues plaguing modern human society, the COVID-19 pandemic testified to the integrally interconnected and interdependent nature of human society, and artificial borders set up by national and international laws (even when not disputed among nations) could only go so far to prevent the novel coronavirus from traveling from one country to another, penetrating one population to another. Although the toll that it took on the different socio-economic and age groups varied, all fell victim to it regardless of ethnicity, gender, social status or religious background. As the world tried to overcome the pandemic, anyone with a cool head and a modicum of wisdom could easily realize that the only way that success in eliminating it could be achieved would be through a concerted interdisciplinary effort by all sectors of society – politics, science, public health, religion, economics, and so on. Those holding fast onto

their ideological axes, insisting on exclusion rather than cooperation, factionalism instead of mutual collaboration, could only serve to obfuscate progress made through the hard work of conscientious individuals and groups.

It was in context of this urgent need for mutual cooperation that religious leaders worldwide responded to the sign of the time by doing their part to combat the pandemic. This chapter examines one aspect of the contribution by religious leaders in the pandemic, namely, the use of social media to communicate spiritual messages, scientific information, and social exhortation to religious adherents in order to influence the thinking and behavior of their communities. We will look to see how religious leaders made use of social media and what kind of content was seen coming from their social media accounts, especially during the early months of the pandemic, which was arguably one of the most frightening and overwhelming periods of the global crisis. The examples cited in this chapter, however, are necessarily limited to only a number of prominent religious leaders from major religious traditions since it would not be possible to investigate content of religious leaders from all levels, traditions, languages, and cultures. However, it is believed that the examples presented in this chapter are indicative of the kind of messages that most mainstream religious leaders around the world have attempted to communicate to the faithful.

### **Religious Leaders and Social Media**

It must be stated that many religious leaders regardless of religious tradition are far from being strangers to social media pre-pandemic. The Dalai Lama joined Twitter since February 2010 and amassed 55,000 followers during the first two days on the microblog.<sup>1</sup> The Dalai Lama's tweets, which aim to promote humanistic and spiritual values across cultures and religions, are well-received throughout the world and are often retweeted by his followers. One of the Dalai Lama's most popular tweets in 2020 (January 6) states:

As human beings, all 7 billion of us are born the same way and die the same way. Physically, mentally and emotionally we are the same. We all

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<sup>1</sup> "Dalai Lama to "Tweet" on Tibet," *Dalai Lama*, February 23, 2020, <https://www.dalailama.com/news/2010/dalai-lama-to-tweet-on-tibet/amp>

want to live a happy life and avoid problems, but in a materialistic culture we overlook the importance of love and affection.<sup>2</sup>

This tweet, like the vast majority of his tweets, are non-religion specific, aimed at common human issues, concerns and aspirations, and therefore reverberates easily with readers throughout the world. The Dalai Lama's strategy of appealing to people of all religions (and non-religion) and cultures are highly conducive to promoting interculturality where people are inspired to relate to each other first and foremost as human beings with specific and profound similarities rather than based on superficial exterior differences.

Like the Dalai Lama, Pope Francis has been active on Twitter since the very first days of his papacy. In March 2013, Pope Francis started to tweet on a regular basis using the same account @Pontifex that was briefly used by his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, beginning in December 2012 (Narbona 2016, 97). Three years later, Pope Francis launched his Instagram account and broke the social media platform's record at that time by amassing one million followers in merely 12 hours (Cathnews 2016). The previous record was held by David Beckham who took twice as long as Pope Francis to reach the one million mark. Pope Francis is now a staple on numerous social media platforms in multiple languages, and also has a number of apps to his name, including the "Click to Pray" app launched in 2019 (Vatican News 2019).

On social media, there are also numerous popular and reputable Muslim religious leaders and scholars. The cleric from Zimbabwe Mufti Ismail Menk ranks among the list of Muslim leaders with a significant social media following – nearly 9 million on Twitter, nearly 5 million on Facebook, 4 million on Instagram, and 3.2 million YouTube subscribers (as of May 2022). His popularity on social media reflects the worldwide recognition for his work, especially his lecture series that are available on the YouTube platform. On his YouTube channel, Mufti Ismail Menk posts numerous short videos addressing many issues facing contemporary society including negative Tik Tok trends, revenge porn, and of course, the coronavirus pandemic.

While the Dalai Lama, Pope Francis, and Mufti Ismail Menk are some of the most prominent international religious leaders on social media, the platforms are filled with leaders from across religious traditions and of various levels of prominence. Some aim to speak to their fellow adherents, but many also speak to other groups. There are also many who are quietly present on one or two platforms, using them not so much as means for evangelization or

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<sup>2</sup> <https://twitter.com/DalaiLama/status/1214132094646935552>

promoting religious values, but rather to share photos with family and friends, or to keep in touch with them. Admittedly, attitudes among religious leaders towards social media run the gamut of enthusiastic participation because of the evangelization potential of the technology to trepidation due to fear of overexposure.

### **Need Arising from the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a particularly urgent need for religious leaders to employ all available means of communication to address the crisis. In May 2020, the U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres spoke to international religious leaders at the high-level video conference on “The Role of Religious Leaders in Addressing the Multiple Challenges of COVID-19,” saying, “Religious leaders in my opinion can play a pivotal role to deliver solutions to not only address the pandemic, but to recover better.”<sup>3</sup> In the speech, among other suggestions, Guterres also asked religious leaders to “leverage your networks and communication capacities to support Governments in promoting World Health Organization (WHO)- recommended public health measures — from physical distancing to good hygiene — and to ensure that faith-based activities, including worship, religious ceremonies and burial practices, comply with these measures.”<sup>4</sup>

In April 2020, prior to the UN Chief’s remarks, the WHO had already published a document entitled “Practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19.” In this document, the WHO recognized that religious leaders and faith communities “are a primary source of support, comfort, guidance, and direct health care and social service, for the communities they serve.” The WHO called on religious institutions to “promote helpful information, prevent and reduce fear and stigma, provide reassurance to people in their communities, and promote health-saving practices.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> UN Secretary-General Remarks, May 13, 2020, <https://foreignaffairs.co.nz/2020/05/13/mil-osi-united-nations-shared-vulnerability-to-covid-19-reveals-common-humanity-secretary-general-tells-faith-leaders-stressing-their-key-role-in-fighting-intolerance-disinformation/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> WHO, “Practical Considerations and Recommendations for Religious Leaders and Faith-Based Communities in the Context of COVID-19,” April 7, 2020.

The decision by political leaders and health organizations to actively engage religious leaders in the pandemic was prudent and necessary because in the age of social media, information shared online about COVID-19 often originated from dubious sources. In addition, misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories also had the megaphones of very prominent personalities in the political, entertainment and yes, even religious world. Simultaneously taking place with the pandemic was the ‘infodemic’ that saw the French Minister of Health, Olivier Véran tweeting on March 14, 2020: “The intake of anti-inflammatory drugs (ibuprofen, cortisone, ...) could be a factor in worsening the infection. If you have a fever, take acetaminophen. If you are already taking anti-inflammatory drugs or in doubt, ask your doctor for advice” (Orso et al. 2020, 327). In a few short days, this message was retweeted over 40,000 times and became a point of discussion and anxiety throughout the world. However, as the matter was later examined more closely by experts, it was discovered that there was no basis to such assertion.

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, in August 2020, Facebook had to remove a video from US President Donald Trump’s page for violating its content rules by erroneously claiming that children were “almost immune from COVID-19” in a Fox News interview (Wong 2020). According to medical experts, although there was evidence suggesting that in general children did not experience the symptoms as severely as adults, they were certainly not immune from infection. Children of all ages, even newborns have been infected with the coronavirus, and some have died from the disease. In the decision to remove the post, Facebook said, “This video includes false claims that a group of people is immune from COVID-19 which is a violation of our policies around harmful Covid misinformation” (Ibid). Despite the removal of the Trump video marking the first time that the social media platform took action against the US president for making false assertions about COVID-19 or any issue for that matter, this was hardly the first piece of misinformation about the disease coming from Trump. The US leader has been seen to make repeatedly incorrect and unsubstantiated claims on everything from methods of treatment for COVID-19 (Piller 2020) to the rate of mortality in the United States (Blake 2020). With over 85 million followers on Twitter alone (as of August 2020), one can imagine the kind of influence Trump could exert on his audience, especially his diehard fans.

However, it is not only misinformation from famous people that go viral. Posts that originated from unknown sources also get countless shares on the internet. It was these posts that get people to take preventative measures to

avoid being infected by the coronavirus by eating sweet potatoes and ingesting various vitamin supplements, and people all over the world gargling with salt in order to kill the virus as it appears in the throat (Powder 2020). On the religious front, misinformation and disinformation caused Hindus in India to drink cow urine (Siddiqui 2020), and Muslims in Iran to lick and kiss the gate of the Masumeh shrine in Qom (Sini and Shabhbazian 2020) in order to ward off the coronavirus. Misinformation and disinformation on social media were so rampant during the pandemic that it was reported that in April 2020 alone, Facebook flagged nearly 50 million pieces of COVID-19 related content with the warning label for disinformation. In the same month, Twitter challenged over 1.5 million users because of posts displaying erroneous information and “manipulative behaviors.” At the same time, Google was forced to block tens of millions of scam emails about COVID-19 (UNESCO 2020).

Parallel to the production of massive amount of misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 on social media was the increase in the amount of time that people were spending on the internet due to lockdown in many localities. According to We Are Social (2020), in July 2020, global internet penetration reached 59 percent while active social media users reached 51 percent. The number of active social media users represented a 2 percent increase from just the beginning of the year, and over 10 percent compared to the previous year (We Are Social 2020b). It was estimated that in a period of 12 months, there were 12 new social media every second (Ibid). In the meantime, internet traffic increased by as much as 30 percent in 2020 as compared to the previous year (McKeay 2020). In July 2020, on average people used the internet a total of 6 hours and 42 minutes a day, nearly 2.5 hours of which was spent on social media (We Are Social 2020b). As the pandemic went on, the rate of internet penetration and use continued to increase as people turned to digital technology to carry out their life activities and to pass the time.

### **Religious Leaders as the Source of Authoritative Voice**

In the face of rampant misinformation and disinformation from all nooks and crannies of society appearing on social media and affecting the thought and behavior of people, there was an indisputable need for authoritative and trustworthy voices coming from religious leaders – both local and international – in order to combat forces preventing effective and timely resolution of the pandemic. Enlisting religious leaders into this effort is not difficult to

understand. In reality, religious leaders through the use of social media can accomplish multiple tasks that are unique to their position in their respective communities. An examination of social media accounts of prominent religious leaders reveal that the message communicated to the public was multi-dimensional, representing the intricate and multi-faceted role of religious leaders in their relationship with religious adherents.

### 1. Communicating Personal Presence

Personal presence with the faithful is one of the highest priorities of religious leadership. Active presence by leaders communicates care and concern for the community. Only through active presence will leaders be able to recognize important issues in the community needing to be addressed. Pope Francis used the metaphor of “shepherds living with the smell of the sheep” to describe Church leaders who are not absentee leaders but are intimately connected to their community and engaged in the daily happenings in their lives (Glatz 2013). Moreover, active presence by religious leaders provides the necessary motivation and directions needed for the community to take actions towards social advancement. Nonetheless, the presence of religious leaders not only carries emotional but also spiritual significance. For example, within a number of Hindu schools, the guru is seen as a divinized figure, or the personification of divinity. The Hindu scripture entitled *Guru-Gītā* (Song of the Guru) contains a verse that declares the guru to be ‘*sākshāt Parabrahman*,’ the very form of the supreme entity (Irons 2020). In this sense, the guru’s presence also signifies divine presence among the people. In the Catholic Church, the Pope is often referred to as the ‘Vicar of Christ’ because it is “expressive of his supreme headship of the Church on earth, which he bears in virtue of the commission of Christ and with vicarial power derived from Him” (New Advent 2021). More generally, the notion of the Vicar of Christ, is someone designated as Christ’s earthly representative on earth. Because of this special honor and responsibility, it is easy to see why the Pope’s personal presence to the faithful would carry profound meaning for the Church. In a similar vein, Catholic priests are often referred to as ‘*alter Christus*’ (another Christ), to emphasize that Christ is present in the priest in a unique way by virtue of his ordination. According to Catholic Church teaching,

In the ecclesial service of the ordained minister, it is Christ himself who is present to his Church as Head of his Body, Shepherd of his flock,

high priest of the redemptive sacrifice, Teacher of Truth. This is what the Church means by saying that the priest, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, acts *in persona Christi Capitis*: It is the same priest, Christ Jesus, whose sacred person his minister truly represents. Now the minister, by reason of the sacerdotal consecration which he has received, is truly made like to the high priest and possesses the authority to act in the power and place of the person of Christ himself (*virtute ac persona ipsius Christi*). (CCC, no. 1548)

As important as personal presence by the religious leader is in the life of the community, active presence in the form of physical presence is not always possible – as the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated very clearly. As the coronavirus was rapidly spreading, entire cities and countries went into lockdown forcing the closure of schools, businesses, entertainment venues and places for religious gathering. Religious leaders could no longer appear physically in front of a gathered congregation or visit them at their homes as such activities would violate local ordinances. In this situation, religious leaders taking to social media was a practical and safe way to communicate their ongoing personal presence in the midst of separation and isolation. This online presence attempts to communicate that neither God nor God’s representatives on earth have abandoned the people in time of trials and tribulations. This presence, while online, was not ‘virtual’ in the sense that it was somehow ‘inauthentic’ or not ‘real.’ Admittedly online presence mediated by social media has many limitations, but this presence could be considered real and personal in the sense that this communicative process was taking place between embodied individuals – both the one performing the communicative act and the one on the receiving end of the communication. This communicative process has the potential power to comfort, transform and motivate those who participate in it. The digital age with social media has enabled personal presence to be exercised in other effective ways beside physical presence. Although physical presence is irreplaceable in terms of leadership, no matter in the religious or secular spheres, digitally mediated presence during the pandemic was nonetheless a source of real comfort for people who desired to stay connected to their religious leaders.

## 2. Communicating Theology and Spiritual Wisdom

For people of religion, many questions arise during times of personal, communal, and global catastrophes and calamities. The specific questions will differ depending on one's religious background. However, the common questions may include: Is this happening because of my sins? Is God punishing the world for its wayward ways? How can God let this kind of suffering take place in the world? What is God telling us with these events happening? Where is God in all of this? Is this a sign of the apocalypse? Are the gods angry about something? Is this the manifestation of personal and collective karma that humanity must pay for?

One of the primary tasks of any religious leader is to present authoritative, orthodox theology and spiritual principles that can help the faithful make sense of the events taking place in their lives and in the world. This sense-making function is an ongoing responsibility of the religious leader because human life is filled with constant happenings, big and small, one after the other, all of which can bring joy and hope, or fear, bewilderment, panic, and despair. In this manner, this work by religious leaders did not simply arise with the pandemic; however, the scale of the crisis made these questions more urgent and widespread. The need to understand or have a grasp of the meaning of phenomenal events in human life and to find a way out of despair and suffering is fundamental to the religious quest.

Religious leaders engage in this endeavor both on their own behalf but also on the behalf of the suffering humanity. This is precisely why the Gautama Buddha, having discovered the path to enlightenment, which he himself achieved over 2,500 years ago, could not bear to escape *Samsara* (the cycle of rebirth) without first relating the Noble Truths to others so that they too could also be liberated. This is also the reason why *boddbhisattvas* (enlightened beings) in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition vow to delay their own “complete disappearance” from the world until all sentient beings in the universe are also saved (Nadeau 2014, 181). Religious leaders are not necessarily those who have achieved enlightenment, as abundant empirical evidence tells us; however, they are people who engage specifically in the process of spiritual quest and also lead and accompany fellow human beings on this journey. Whether through self-designation or being charged with the task, religious leaders have a following to whom they are responsible to serve.

In the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an urgency for religious leaders to use social media to communicate theological and spiritual wisdom to their

communities because there was not only an ‘infodemic’ regarding the scientific aspects of the pandemic, but also religiously inspired ideas that were not helpful towards understanding and confronting the crisis. Ideas that the COVID-19 pandemic would bring to realization apocalyptic predictions in the Bible’s Book of Revelation can cause feelings of panic and despair among those who believed. Religiously inspired thinking that drove people to drink cow urine and lick a shrine can instigate disdain and mockery from those who look for opportunities to belittle religious people as ignorant and superstitious. Religious sentiments that the pandemic was God’s punishment on a particular society or culture can fan the flames of social and religious division. In the face of situations that present risk of extreme thinking and behavior, religious leaders can instill sensibility and hope in their constituents with sound theological and spiritual explanations to make sense of the events in order to maintain spiritual and emotional balance.

As the need for spiritual leadership was intensely high during the pandemic, religious leaders took to social media to respond to this need. Pope Francis’ daily Mass celebrations, which usually were private, began to be live streamed on social media. In the Mass, the Pope was able to call for prayer for various individuals such as the victims, doctors, nurses, and children, etc. In his homilies, he related the scripture readings to the events in human life and tried to keep the faithful grounded in the Christian virtues of faith, love, and hope. In the *Angelus* prayer on March 15, 2020, Pope Francis also reminded all those people listening to him through communications media to remain steadfastly united to Christ. He stated:

In this situation of pandemic, in which we find ourselves living more or less isolated, we are invited to rediscover and deepen the value of communion that unites all the members of the Church. United to Christ we are never alone, but we form one sole Body, of which He is the Head. It is a union that is nourished with prayer, and also with spiritual communion in the Eucharist, a practice that is highly recommended when it is not possible to receive the Sacrament. I say this for everyone, especially for those who live alone. (2020, 99)

In the homily on Palm Sunday April 5, 2020, Pope Francis exhorted the faithful to find courage and consolation in God’s love with the words:

In the tragedy of a pandemic, in the face of the many false securities that have now crumbled, in the face of so many hopes betrayed, in the sense of abandonment that weighs upon our hearts, Jesus says to each one of us: “Courage, open your heart to my love. You will feel the consolation of God who sustains you.” (Ibid, 162)

Thus, throughout the pandemic, Pope Francis was a fixture on social media giving words of spiritual wisdom and encouragement through his homilies and messages. Likewise, the Dalai Lama continued to send out tweets on a regular basis during this time. On March 30, 2020, His Holiness linked to his Twitter account a statement published on his website regarding the crisis. In it, the religious leader gave practical advice to all in the face of tribulations:

Faced with threats to our health and well-being, it is natural to feel anxiety and fear. Nevertheless, I take great solace in the following wise advice to examine the problems before us: If there is something to be done—do it, without any need to worry; if there’s nothing to be done, worrying about it further will not help.<sup>6</sup>

In another statement published on April 14, 2020, the Dalai Lama succinctly put the pandemic into a wider perspective, encouraging his followers to see beyond present hardships and obstacles. He writes: “As a Buddhist, I believe in the principle of impermanence. Eventually, this virus will pass, as I have seen wars and other terrible threats pass in my lifetime, and we will have the opportunity to rebuild our global community as we have done many times before.”

While only a small number of the Dalai Lama’s tweets since the beginning of the pandemic directly mention COVID-19 or pandemic, the spiritual wisdom contained in his messages to his nearly 20 million followers could be applied to any human situation, culture, and time. For example, the tweet on August 10, 2020 states: “As soon as I wake up in the morning, I remind myself that nothing exists as it appears. Then I think about sentient beings who want happiness, but experience suffering. I generate compassion for them, determined to help them as much as I can to eliminate their negative emotions.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the pandemic, in light of the long and broad history and future of humankind in particular, and

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<sup>6</sup> Dalai Lama, “A special message from His Holiness the Dalai Lama,” March 30, 2020, <https://www.dalailama.com/news/2020/a-special-message-from-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama>

<sup>7</sup> Dalai Lama, <https://twitter.com/DalaiLama/status/1292755129410625538>.

sentient beings in general, represents an episode in which human beings are presented with opportunities to demonstrate compassion to others. In reality, these opportunities exist with or without the pandemic.

While Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama represent leaders at the international level, there are also leaders at the local level who also have their smaller communities to serve. In suburban Grenoble, France, Imam Yassine Farhi reminded the Muslim faithful who gathered that the notion of the COVID-19 pandemic being God's punishment was a misunderstanding about God and about the crisis. The imam reminded worshippers that the companions of the Prophet Muhammad were "among the best believers who ever existed," but they themselves were affected by the plague that befell them at the time (Priol 2020). Farhi was responding to the sentiment in a number of Muslim circles who interpreted the pandemic as an act of punishment from God. Another Muslim leader, Omar Ricci, the chairperson of the Islamic Center of Southern California, one of the oldest and most prominent mosques in the US, used one of his Friday sermons to expound on the relationship of human beings to God in light of the pandemic. In his sermon which was uploaded onto YouTube, Ricci attempted to put the pandemic into a spiritual perspective, saying that the pandemic reminded the people that human beings were not in control but must be dependent on God. In these difficult times, they could be grateful to God for opportunities to pay greater attention to taking care of their bodies and health, to calm down and retreat from the hyperactivity of life. They could also be grateful to God for opportunities to form new bonds and relationships with others. And the empty groceries shelves at the supermarkets could also serve as a reminder to be grateful for the food that was once so easily obtainable (Ricci 2020).

### **3. Communicating Divine Presence through Religious Rituals**

In many religious traditions, religious rituals play an important role in the life of the faithful. In the Hindu tradition, the devotional practice of *Puja* to offer reverence and honor to the divine is the most common form of worship among Hindu followers. Individuals or family groups go to temples to request this ritual from a priest in order to give thanks, ask for divine blessings, or simply out of pure devotion to a particular deity. The ritual can be performed any day as well as on special cultural and religious festivals. One of the key aspects of this devotional practice is the opportunity for mutual eye contact between the deity and the worshippers (*darshan*). Hindus believe that the *darshan* that takes

place confers on them the deity's energy and blessings. The religious rituals, if performed appropriately by the priest, effects authentic divine presence in the painted and sculpted images and facilitates the experience of *darshan* desired by the faithful (Khan Academy 2020).

If the *Puja* plays an essential role in the life of devoted Hindus, then the Mass plays a no less fundamental role in the life of Catholic Christians. According to Catholic teachings, Catholics are obligated to attend Mass on Sundays and other important days designated by the liturgical calendar. However, many Catholics also attend daily Mass in order to nourish their faith life. According to the Church's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (no. 7),

Christ is always present in the Church, especially in its Liturgical Celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of His minister, "the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross," but especially under the Eucharistic species... He is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church. He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings, for He promised: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20).

For Catholics, the presence of Christ in the Eucharistic species (bread and wine changed into the body and blood of Christ) becomes an intimate experience of communion with Christ when they are able to receive this food for their spiritual nourishment.

In the age of COVID-19, as temples, mosques, churches, and all types of worship places were shuttered in accordance with government restrictions, the faithful were not only kept away from religious gatherings, but they were also often confined to their homes when the city or country went into complete lockdown. To respond to the desire for divine connection facilitated by religious rituals, religious leaders often performed rituals either alone or with only a small number of participants and broadcasted them online either as video or as a live stream. In India, there was a huge leap in demand for online *pujas* while the country was in lockdown. Facilitated by a religious concierge service provider, people could request for *pujas* to be performed by a priest from his own *puja* room, while the clients watched the ritual live via Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp (Ganguly 2020). In addition to arranging the performance of the *puja*, the company also arranged for the *darshan* at temples online. The online

*pujas* are convenient not only for Hindus in India who could not get to the temple, but also for Hindus living overseas where there are no temples to go to – with or without lockdown. Thus, during the pandemic, where people were stricken by fear, anxiety and sickness, the online *pujas* helped Hindu faithful to seek divine intervention and presence.

Unlike *pujas* which are private events in that they are requested by individuals and groups and are only viewed by those who have made the request, Catholic Masses are usually public events that are organized daily in churches and chapels throughout the world. From the Vatican to the jungles of the Amazon, Masses are celebrated every day by the Pope, bishops, and priests. During the pandemic, in countries where lockdowns or restrictions on large group gatherings were enforced, many religious leaders broadcasted their Masses online. During the height of the pandemic in Italy, Pope Francis live streamed his Masses each morning from the chapel in Casa Santa Marta and could be viewed on multiple social media platforms. During Holy Week, the most important occasion on the Christian calendar, in those countries where the pandemic was serious, causing places of worship to close, bishops and priests had to celebrate all their liturgies either alone or with only a small number of people present. These liturgies would be viewed online either as a live streaming broadcast or as a video. Although the faithful could not receive communion as they normally would when attending Mass at church, they were encouraged to receive ‘spiritual communion,’ which St. Thomas Aquinas summed up as “the ardent desire to receive Jesus in the Holy Sacrament, and a loving embrace as though we had already received Him.” Thus, through digital technology and social media, church leaders attempted to communicate God’s presence through liturgies that people were able to view from the comfort and safety of their own homes. Maria Lee Albento, a Catholic living in Hong Kong expressed her experience of participating in Mass online as follows:

I feel happy attending Mass online and I still find it a blessing. As we all know God is everywhere and I feel his presence as like in a real Mass. The only sad thing is that we cannot receive the actual communion but only the spiritual communion. Being used to receive his body and blood every Sunday, I feel something lacking but we cannot do anything about it because of the present situation we are facing. I always watch Mass online every Sunday and it helps me keep my faith and to find a way to strengthen it more. Through our prayers we know that everything will

be restored to normal. We just need to ask God to heal our lands from this horrifying pandemic. (Sunday Examiner 2020)

Although the experience of participating in Mass online cannot replace the actual gathering, one of the unexpected effects of the many online Masses broadcasted during the pandemic was that they were also viewed by Catholics who otherwise may not regularly go to church.

#### 4. Communicating Useful and Correct Information to the Public

Religious leaders as it is well-known, are not only in position of authority in religious and spiritual matters but are also respected in their communities when it comes to other spheres of life. Because religious leaders are viewed by their adherents as having the best interests of the people in mind, their voices are often heeded over those of political and social leaders, sometimes even scientists. Thus, religious leaders have long been involved in areas beyond the religious domain such as social and economic development, peace and justice work, and environmental conservation. Although religious leaders may not have direct expertise in such areas, what they command is respect and the loyalty of the faithful. As the prominent Muslim scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr states,

The fact remains that the vast majority of people in the world do not accept any ethics which does not have a religious foundation. This means in practical terms that if a religious figure, let us say, a *mulla* or a *brabmin* in India or Pakistan, goes to a village and tells the villagers that from the point of view of the *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) or the Law of Manu (Hindu law) they are forbidden to cut this tree, many people would accept. But if some graduate from the University of Delhi or Karachi, who is a government official, comes and says, for rational reasons, philosophical and scientific reasons, that it is better not to cut this tree, few would heed his advice. (2007, 31)

In reality, wise and capable religious leaders realize that while they have the trust and the loyalty of their congregations, they need to collaborate with experts who have the necessary knowledge in order to present sound scientific information and to help shape effective community policies and actions. This was clearly demonstrated in the Catholic encyclical *Laudato Si* of Pope Francis,

in which the first chapter of the document discussed the issue of ecological degradation solidly based on modern scientific consensus regarding the crisis.

Thus, in enlisting the cooperation of religious leaders in the COVID-19 pandemic, both the WHO and UN Secretary General demonstrated that they appreciated the degree of influence that religious leaders exerted on their communities not only in matters of faith but also in areas pertaining to the secular sphere. Oftentimes, through the outreach work of the religious community, the larger community is also positively impacted. In its document addressing religious leaders, the WHO affirms that “religious leaders are a critical link in the safety net for vulnerable people within their faith community and wider communities.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, in the effort to present the public with accurate information,

Faith leaders also have a special responsibility to counter and address misinformation, misleading teachings, and rumors, which can spread rapidly and cause great damage. Sermons and messages can build on factual information provided by WHO and national or local public health authorities and is in line with doctrine/teaching and practice of their respective faith traditions. Religious leaders can access guidance in formats and lay language that their members can understand.<sup>9</sup>

UN Secretary General António Guterres, in addition to asking religious leaders to help fight against misinformation and disinformation, also called on them to “encourage all communities to promote non-violence and reject xenophobia, racism and all forms of intolerance.”<sup>10</sup> In the same spirit as the WHO and Guterres, H.E. Tijjani Muhammad Bange (2020), President of the 74<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly, expressed in a statement as follows:

With the unprecedented threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and its devastating impact on communities and nations across the globe, religious leaders and faith-based organisations will play even a greater role in saving lives and mitigating the spread of the disease. During this time, we look up to them to share credible information and stand up against rumours, violence, and the incitement of hate and advocate for the needs of vulnerable populations.

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<sup>8</sup> WHO, “Practical Considerations.”

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> UN Secretary General Remarks, 13 May 2020.

In response to the need for combating misinformation and disinformation, religious leaders resorted to social media to help them spread useful information in line with expert guidelines. Indeed, at a time when places of worship were closed down, the one place that religious leaders could be sure to find their community members was on social media. On the Dalai Lama's Twitter account, he linked a statement from his own website, part of which reminded people that "this crisis shows that we must all take responsibility where we can. We must combine the courage doctors and nurses are showing with empirical science to begin to turn this situation around and protect our future from more such threats."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, religious leaders worldwide understood well the seriousness of the pandemic and wished to remind people that overcoming the disease of the coronavirus did not depend merely on faith but needed actions consistent with solid scientific understanding. Thus, in a YouTube post, Mufti Ismail Menk (2020) plainly stated:

No one passes away except by the decree of Allah. That we know. At the same time, we're taught to be very, very careful. We're taught to take precautions. We're taught to be responsible, and we should ... take it seriously! Taking it seriously does not negate your faith in Allah... You take precautions then you rely on Allah. You can't just say, 'I rely on Allah' and then do as you please. That's foolish. That's ignorant. It's the height of ignorance even if bearded men are telling that to you. It's the height of ignorance to say, 'Don't do anything about it.'

The kind of exhortation such as that expressed by Mufti Ismail Menk was a staple in the messaging effort of sensible religious leaders worldwide. At the iconic Hindu Neasden Temple in Britain, the head monk Yogvivekdas Swami broadcasted religious rituals every evening. After the religious part of the broadcast was finished, the monk took an additional 10 minutes to brief the online audience (6,000-10,000 people) on news and public health information. Having been a practicing doctor before joining monastic life, the monk could move easily between technical medical science, public health guidance and Hindu teachings. In one of his briefings conducted in Gujarati, the religious leader reminded the people that "now is not the time to be overly philosophical or to falsely apply scriptural ideas; now is the time to follow the guidance of the government, as indeed that is wish of our guru and God" (Irons 2020).

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<sup>11</sup> The Dalai Lama, "Why we need to fight the coronavirus with compassion."

Hindu religious leaders, not unlike their counterparts in other religious traditions, used their platforms to present a multi-pronged message consisting of calling for spiritual introspection, unity, mutual support, and proper behavior. HH Mahant Swami Maharaj (2020), a global leader in the BAPS Swaminarayan Hindu tradition, recorded a video uploaded on YouTube calling on Hindus to practice all the necessary things recommended by experts as well as engage in spiritual devotion, maintain steadfast faith in God, and stay unified. Thus, religious leaders often used their social media platforms to call for personal and civic responsibility as well as taking the opportunity to achieve spiritual growth during time of crisis.

### **5. Communicating Examples of Proper Behavior**

During Vietnam's first wave which took place in the months of March to May 2020, Catholic churches were closed nationwide as part of a concerted effort by the Vietnamese government to push back the coronavirus. Masses went online and were broadcasted mostly through social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. One noticed that in some of the online Masses, the celebrant, either a bishop or a priest, wore a mask even though he was not standing in close proximity to the few other people which were also present to perform their roles in the liturgy either as readers or servers. In some ways, it seemed odd and unnecessary to see the celebrant of a solemn religious rite covering half of his face with a piece of fabric since the celebrant did not seem to be in a position to be in danger of being infected by another person or himself infecting someone else. A number of people viewing this action online were curious as to why the Mass celebrant seemed to be overly cautious and discussions ensued on social media. Based on the discussion on social media, many Vietnamese Catholics perceived the reason for wearing a mask by the bishop or priest while celebrating Mass was not necessarily due to any immediate danger of infection. Many viewed the mask wearing as reflecting the religious leader's intentional attempt to communicate and model proper behavior for Catholics in their daily life, knowing that some people might be careless or averse to wearing face coverings, especially when going to church. By wearing the mask during the liturgy, the religious leaders set an example for how to prevent the spread of the virus within the community. As the bishops and priests who wore masks during the liturgy did not participate in or comment on these social media discussions, it is not certain what their true intentions were. However, what is evident is that many viewers interpreted their action

positively as communicating and modeling proper behavior to the faithful, when it came to wearing masks.

Not only in Vietnam, in Thailand religious leaders such as Buddhist monks also appeared with masks both online and offline. Whether it was leading a prayer session, giving a sermon, performing a ritual, or making their morning rounds around towns and villages collecting alms from Buddhist faithful, monks appeared in masks and even face shields. Online, one could even see photos of statues of the Buddha being covered with a face mask as well as drawings of monks and Buddhists wearing face masks as they engage with each other. These images helped communicate to the people the ‘normalcy’ of the practice of wearing masks and the necessity in taking recommended actions to prevent the spread of the virus. Indeed, the ease which religious leaders in Vietnam and Thailand dealt with the issue of wearing masks, reflected in how they appeared in public and even online, contrasted greatly with certain world political leaders on the very same issue. Most notorious were the presidents of two of the largest countries in the world—Donald Trump of the United States and Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil—who eschewed mask wearing even when they were appearing in public close to other people. Compared to political leaders like Trump and Bolsonaro, for religious leaders around the world, mask wearing was not a politicized issue. Thus, many were happy to wear them in different contexts not only for protecting themselves and others, but also to set a good example for their followers.

Religious leaders also took to social media to communicate examples in other ways. In the United States, Father Anthony Tam Pham, a Catholic priest who is also a medical doctor documented on his Facebook account his experience of volunteering in a New York hospital during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in that state.<sup>12</sup> Since then, he has also organized COVID-19 testing in the Houston, Texas community where he is based and where the pandemic hit hard in the summer months of 2020. By documenting these kinds of outreach activities on a personal level, Father Pham communicated and modeled the kind of engagement that Catholics could have in order to play their part in fighting the crisis. In the Philippines, Fr. John Mi Shen, a Chinese priest teaching at University of Santo Tomas in Manila began celebrating daily Mass online since January 2020 for a group of about 100 Catholics from Wuhan, China the original epicenter of the global pandemic. According to Fr. Mi Shen, he chose to celebrate the ‘private’ online Mass with this group instead of the ‘public’ Mass where anyone could tune in because he wanted to maintain a warm

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<sup>12</sup> Anthony Tam Pham, Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/tam.pham.75098>

atmosphere where relationships could be built. As a result of this ongoing activity, Fr. Mi Shen said he got to know all the families in a personal way. “Many of them approached me for online consulting, so I was able to get to know most of them and their concerns,” he said. They also became Fr. Mi Shen’s mission partners to the poor in the Philippines because in addition to celebrating Mass online for the group of Wuhan Catholics, Fr. Mi Shen also used Chinese social media platforms to publicize about the hardship that Filipinos suffered during the pandemic. As a result of sharing such stories of pain and suffering, he received considerable donations from China, including from his ‘online Christian community,’ to help Filipino victims of COVID-19. Fr. Mi Shen said that many Chinese people displayed generosity because having gone through the crisis first, they were able to empathize with the hardships that Filipinos were going through.<sup>13</sup> In reality, outreach activities organized and carried out by religious leaders of all levels, nationalities and traditions could easily be found on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Evaluating Religious Leaders’ Communication via Social Media**

Presently, there has been no known effort to systematically evaluate the effectiveness of the communication which religious leaders carried out on social media regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is uncertain if there can be any accurate instrument to evaluate this kind of activity, especially when it involves countless religious leaders of different capacities, from different religious traditions and cultures. The intention of this examination, moreover, is not to try to accomplish any such task. What has been done thus far is an attempt to identify the content of the communication by religious leaders who made use of social media. The five types of content identified above demonstrate that the communication done by religious leaders included a complex set of information and images that went far beyond merely imparting practical information about the pandemic. Rather communication by religious leaders also addressed spiritual issues arising from the pandemic as well as affirming the ongoing personal presence of the religious leaders in the lives of their followers. In these ways, the nature of the communication by religious leaders can readily be seen as distinctly different from the communication done by secular leaders and scientists, which usually focused more on information

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<sup>13</sup> Direct personal communication, August 22, 2020.

aimed at understanding the science and the ways to control and combat the pandemic.

While it is not possible to determine the level of effectiveness of religious leaders' communication, it can be suggested that a greater degree of positive outcome would be achieved if in their communication on social media, religious leaders take into consideration the following issues:

1. *Consistent communication strategy:* Religious followers should know what to expect from their religious leader in terms of content and messaging as to be able to rely on him/her as a regular source of information. For example, the head monk Yogvivekdas Swami at the Neasden Temple consistently gave his daily 'briefing' following his religious rituals, helping his viewers to recognize the value of tuning in to his broadcasts, not only for spiritual nourishment, but also for useful knowledge that they might otherwise not have access to. This was especially true for the Hindu community in Britain, in which many older members did not have a strong grasp of English, and thus depended on the monk who could speak their native language for regular updates. The Dalai Lama's communication strategy of speaking to a cross-cultural, interreligious audience is evident in his tweets, and his audience could be sure that when turning to him for a dose of wisdom, they can appreciate the value of his words no matter what their religious affiliation might be. Mufti Menk's personable and plainspoken communication strategy helps make the teachings which he attempts to impart accessible to a large contemporary global audience, including the young generation.

2. *Stay abreast on various dimensions of the issue with accurate information:* Religious leaders who do not carefully study contemporary issues and stay updated on the latest developments can easily become the source of misinformation and disinformation. This is even more dangerous considering the status of religious leaders within their respective communities. Unfortunately, from North America to Africa, many religious leaders have been found to be purveyors of misinformation both online and offline. For example, in Lagos, Nigeria, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome of LoveWorld Incorporated in a sermon on YouTube, preached that the coronavirus pandemic was caused by the introduction of 5G technology, and the vaccine will be used as part of a plot leading to a new world order led by the anti-Christ (Egbunike 2020). In September 2020, Church

authorities in the Archdiocese of Denver, Colorado of the United States launched an investigation of a priest, Fr. Daniel Noland, who appeared in a video on YouTube telling Catholics: “I encourage everybody not to wear a mask. And I am telling you: disobey your bishop, disobey your governor. That’s what I’m telling you” (Flynn 2020). For Nolan, wearing mask was “contrary to your health, contrary to reason, and contrary to the common good.” Needless to say, religious leaders serve a much more useful role when they are willing to heed scientific information and use their pulpit to impart accurate information to their adherents. In the case of imams, mosque megaphones during the pandemic not only can be used to call people to prayer but can also be used to disseminate necessary public health messages (UNICEF 2020). Social media, for imams, can play the same role as mosque megaphones that reach the ears of hundreds of millions of people on a daily basis. With such a massive audience, accurate information would go a long way to help combat the pandemic; on the other hand, misinformation and disinformation will do much damage.

3. *Be active on social media:* The world of social media is an extremely busy, ever changing, and competitive environment full of distractions. Religious leaders who occasionally go on social media to post a message or a video clip cannot expect a large viewership and engagement, unless they have a wide distribution network that can help accelerate the content’s reach. Inactivity or sporadic activity online ultimately reduces visibility, reach and influence. Just like businesses who do social media marketing, religious leaders who wish to attract a large and loyal audience must be willing to invest time and effort into their work. The chances of trending on social media, resulting in more social shares, highly depends on the level of activity of the individual or business. Although religious leaders may not feel the same pressure as businesses to outdo their competition or to succeed on social media, one should not forget that the aim of any social communication is to reach the target audience as much as possible. This goal will be better achieved if one is aware of the structure and dynamics governing social media and be willing to take certain actions that help ensure more positive results from participation in social media.

4. *Interreligious collaboration:* The present world is a diverse global community in which people tend to live among or near people of other faith traditions. Interreligious dialogue among religious leaders can help

shape a more pluralistic message that transcends ethnic and sectarian boundaries. Interreligious messaging strategies can help to reduce the tendency to scapegoat people from other religions and ethnicities in time of calamities. Religious divisiveness in the COVID-19 pandemic was seen in India where the Muslim minority were accused of intentionally spreading the virus in the country (Slater and Masih 2020). Similarly, in Daegu, South Korea, the Shincheonji Church of Jesus (SCJ) was excessively vilified by the government and the media for its role in causing the outbreak of the coronavirus in February 2020. Its leaders were also subjected to a lawsuit by the city of Daegu for “for murder, injury, and violation of prevention and management of infectious diseases” (Burke 2020). While it is undisputed that members of this small new religious movement were responsible for the outbreak in Daegu, the excessive misinformation about the events surrounding the outbreak led to many reports of church members being discriminated in their work and society (Ibid). The experiences of religious minority in India and South Korea demonstrate that interreligious dialogue and collaboration is essential to preventing religious communication that could lead to victimization of a particular religious or ethnic community. As messages broadcasted on social media have the chance of going viral, information that demonizes or scapegoats particular religious groups can be extremely damaging to interreligious relation and social stability.

### **Implications for post-Pandemic Religious Leadership**

The way social media was used as a means of communication by religious leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals that this form of communication may not be a temporary method to hold religious leaders over until the world goes back to ‘normal.’ In reality, the world may not and most likely will not go back to exactly the way it was before with all the impact that this pandemic has exerted on the global economic, political, and social systems. The use of social media as a communication tool during the pandemic may very well be an essential method during the foreseeable future. Therefore, religious leaders who have recently become acquainted with social media should be motivated to make even deeper acquaintance with this new way of staying connected with their followers and the wider world. Once the pandemic has passed, there may never be going back to the way it was. Evidence suggests that

the habits that people acquired during the pandemic, including their internet habit, will continue even after all the lockdowns and restrictions have been lifted. It is reasonable to think that religious leaders who have befriended social media during the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to explore other ways to incorporate this digital technology skillfully and wisely into their work, in particular their communication with people inside and outside of their religious community. Thus, religious leaders will not only have to go on social media to make sense out of various phenomenal events happening in the world, but they will have to make sense out of this very vehicle of communication in their lives. In recent years, many scholars of religion and religious leaders have begun to reflect more systematically on the relationship between digital technology and religious life. No doubt, with the reality of the pandemic in which digital technology became not only an accessory but a necessity to religious work, people of religion had the chance to discover new dimensions about digital technology that will shape how religious leaders view and use digital technology, particularly social media in the future.

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## Catholic Liturgical Teleparticipation before and during the Pandemic, and Questions for the New Normal

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According to tradition, Clare of Assisi (1194-1253) was too ill one Christmas Eve to attend the midnight Mass as she ardently desired – an experience shared by many a Catholic whenever alienated from the liturgy, whether by sickness or other causes like the recent pandemic. In a miraculous way, the Holy Spirit projected the celebration in a nearby church on the wall of her room, such that she was able to see it, hear it, and participate in it from her bed “as if she was present in person.”<sup>1</sup> Because of this event, which is perhaps the earliest recorded, albeit supernaturally initiated telecast in history, Pius XII designated her as the patroness of television in 1957. However, it was not until recently that such an immersive, although remote liturgical experience, would become possible for most people, this time by human effort, thanks to the ongoing development in modern means of communication.

From a Catholic perspective, this essay traces the development of the use of these technologies in liturgy from radio to the Internet, highlighting emerging developments especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. It will then reflect on some key questions for the post-pandemic period, also known as the ‘new normal,’ not only for Catholic liturgical teleparticipation but also for religious social communication in general.

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<sup>1</sup> “comme si elle était présente en personne” See Pius XII, *Lettre Apostolique Proclamant Ste. Claire Patronne Céleste de la Télévision*, February 14, 1957, Vatican Archive, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/fr/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_apl\\_21081958\\_st-claire.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/fr/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-xii_apl_21081958_st-claire.html) (accessed May 4, 2020).

## From Radio to Internet

The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries witnessed the development of modern technologies that would revolutionize human experience in an unprecedented way. Whereas before, one had to be physically present in order to see the Tower of London or hear the Queen, these visual, audio, and eventually audiovisual technologies such as the camera (1816), telephone (1876), radio (1895), motion picture (1895), and television (1927) would make remote, non-vicarious experience possible. Aside from bypassing the necessity of being physically onsite, remote broadcasts would also gradually widen access to indirect and mediated but increasingly vivid experiences.

In terms of its use in Catholic liturgy, it was 90 years ago after the first blessing was imparted *Urbi et Orbi* “to the city and to the world, and to all who live there” over the radio by Pius XI at the conclusion of his speech during the opening of Vatican Radio on February 12, 1931. This monumental event marks the first time that the Pope gave such a blessing using modern communications technology. Also, it is important to note that as early as then, the remotely transmitted blessing had already been deemed efficacious. In fact, reflecting an acute awareness of the reach of the new technology, Pius XI addressed himself on that occasion not only to all people but also to all creation who would be able to hear him through the radio waves. Moreover, he also addressed himself to God, tacitly implying that the divinity could also be reached through the transmission (*Urbi et Orbi* 1931). Thanks to this kind of technology, those who could not be physically present during such occasions are still able to participate in some capacity. Not only are they able to hear the Pope’s message and profit from its substance, they are also able to receive the spiritual benefits attached to his blessing. Similarly, radio broadcasts of the Mass would enable those who were unable to partake of the Eucharist, especially on Sundays and holy days of obligation, for various reasons such as sickness or old age, to literally ‘hear Mass’ on air.

In addition, radio was able to penetrate even remote areas, where it could be enjoyed by several people gathered in the same place at the same time. This was expedient particularly in far-flung communities that could not be reached regularly by a priest. It was also accessible to the poor because it was not too expensive and to the sick and the elderly, who sometimes had a more limited use of vision but were still able to understand what they heard. This would make radio more powerful compared to film, although film had a visual dimension that was lacking in radio. Still, there were also some liturgies that were filmed,

although not on a regular basis, but only for very special occasions, enabling those who were absent to experience these events for as long as they could see and hear the footage. Prior to these technologies, remote experience was only possible in a very limited way through illustrations, manuscripts, books or printed materials that were rare and accessible only to the literate. However, especially with the advent of *telecast* or television broadcast, what Caincross (1997) would call ‘the Death of Distance’ had already begun.

The advent of television in 1927 would radically change the playing field by combining the audiovisual dynamism of film with the broadcast capacity of radio; hence, when it came to liturgy, it would allow its audiences not only to hear the Mass but to see it as well, initially in black and white, and later on in color. This makes the experience closer to that of Saint Clare, which was not only auditory but also visual. Nevertheless, televised liturgies would continue to be a one-way communication just like radio, although there were already some efforts to engage the active participation of the faithful. For instance, Franz-Josef Eilers mentions how the Second German Television Network (ZDF) would indicate the song numbers from a common songbook in the frame to invite the viewers to sing along during the liturgy. The same network would also develop a system of televising the Mass from the same church and with the same priests in order to give their viewers a feeling of being in a kind of parish (2018, 121).

In light of this, I propose to apply and use the term *teleparticipation*, not only as a neologism but also as a real paradigm, when referring to and understanding Catholic remote (*tele*) participation in liturgy. As a term that entails more than mere broadcasts, teleparticipation allows believers to partake of a sacred reality that entails not only consumption but also participation, as Vatican II said, to “take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium (SC)*, no. 4). In the same vein, Eilers avers, “The presentation of liturgical celebrations on radio and television is not a ‘show’ like many other programs but a worship which needs a certain disposition in producers as well as in viewers and listeners” (2018, 123). In this way, remote liturgies can be understood as unprecedented bridges that can effectively straddle the distance not only between the liturgy and the faithful, but even between the faithful and God.

Thus, the Catholic Church would discover and recognize the importance and potential of an emerging media. In its Decree *Inter Mirifica*, the Second Vatican Council would describe them as “wonderful technological discoveries which men of talent, especially in the present era, have made with God’s help”

(no. 1). The same Decree would also claim as the Church's birthright (*nativum ius*) "to have at its disposal and to employ any of these media insofar as they are necessary or useful for the instruction of Christians and all its efforts for the welfare of souls" (no. 3). In relation to this, the Code of Canon Law enjoins that pastors, "availing themselves of a right which belongs to the Church, are to make an ample use of the means of social communication" as an important tool in their pastoral outreach (Can. 822 § 1-3). Aside from the liturgy, the Church would also use these technologies for other aspects of the apostolate such as catechesis; however, these are beyond the scope of this particular study.

Meanwhile, with regard to liturgical broadcasts in particular, the Constitution on the Liturgy would direct that "Radio and television broadcasts of sacred rites must be marked by discretion and dignity... This is especially important when the service to be broadcasted is the Mass" (no. 20). This particular concern of the Council that such liturgies, especially Masses, "should be marked with such care and dignity" was reiterated in the 1967 Instructions *Eucharisticum mysterium* and *Musicam Sacram*.<sup>2</sup> In the same spirit, those studying for the priesthood were explicitly mandated to learn how to use media and to develop their communication skills as a matter "of high importance in the reformed liturgy."<sup>3</sup> Such constant emphasis on the careful preparation and dignified execution of broadcasts is an implicit acknowledgement of their peculiar importance. Nonetheless, there were already some questions not only regarding their appropriateness but also concerning their reality even then, as Eilers reports:

In the early days of popular television, there was quite a lively discussion between leading theologians including Karl Rahner, questioning if the Eucharistic celebration is *really* a public happening which can be transmitted by modern communication means at all. It was argued that in the days of the early Church, only those initiated through baptism were admitted to the full celebration of the liturgy and all others excluded. The celebration of the Eucharist should not be a public happening which it becomes when transmitted through mass media, especially through television. The old 'arcane discipline' of the

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<sup>2</sup> See Sacred Congregation of Rites, Instruction on worship of the Eucharist *Eucharisticum mysterium*, AAS 59 (1967) 539-573, no. 22 and Instruction on music in the liturgy *Musicam Sacram*, AAS 60 (1967) 300-320, no. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, Basic Plan for Priestly Formation *In Synodo Episcopali*, AAS 62 (1970), 321-384.

early Church should also be respected today. (2018, 121, Emphasis added)

Contrary to this opinion, the 1971 Pastoral Instruction, *Communio et Progressio*, would once again underline the value of religious broadcasts, including transmissions of liturgical celebrations, and the idea of outsiders gaining access to the church remotely. Among the benefits of these religious programmes it lists: 1) their educative and transformative value; 2) their relational and pastoral value in their capacity to sustain the Church's connection, especially with members who cannot go to church, like the sick and infirm; and 3) their missionary import in their potential to forge new relationships with the so-called 'unchurched' seekers who engage and can be engaged through these modern technologies, and their ability to reach people even in places where the Church cannot be physically present. It says:

Religious programmes that utilize all the resources of radio and television enrich people's religious life and create new bonds between the faithful. They help in religious education and in the Church's active commitment in the world. They are bonds of union for those who cannot share physically in the life of the Church because of their sickness or old age. In addition, they create new relationships between the faithful and those people – and today they are legion – who have no affiliation with any Church and yet subconsciously seek spiritual nourishment. They carry the message of the Gospel to countries where the Church is not. The Church cannot afford to ignore such opportunities. On the contrary, she will make the fullest use of any fresh opportunities that the improvement of those instruments may disclose. (no. 150)

These very same effects are the ones that would be heightened by the coming of the Internet, which made its debut just a little over fifty years ago in 1969. From having a similar capacity for one-way transmission in its initial stages (Web 1.0), the Internet has taken mediated communication further with the interactive and dynamic features of "social networks" (Web 2.0) that enable people to engage in online virtual communities. Gradually, the Internet would continue to evolve into an intuitive, user-sensitive web (Web 3.0). At present,

new modalities of a so-called integrative web (Web 4.0) that blurs the divide between offline and online are becoming increasingly commonplace.<sup>4</sup>

Lamentably, the Catholic Church's use of the Internet for liturgy has been largely confined to streaming videos of liturgical celebrations with little to no interactivity, which is very Web 1.0 or primitive Web 2.0 at the most. In the Philippines, for instance, online streaming of liturgies in real time were in fact a rarity before the pandemic and limited to just a handful of very large shrines in Metro Manila like Quiapo Church, Baclaran Church and the National Shrine of Saint Jude Thaddeus. Meanwhile, most liturgical transmissions still come in the form of radio and TV broadcasts, which are sometimes not even done live<sup>5</sup> despite the kind of technology available, even as analog radio and television itself are gradually becoming obsolete in many parts of the world. At the same time, these broadcasts especially those transmitted through mainstream channels have been rather inconvenient, being allocated odd timeslots in the very early morning or late hours of the night for commercial reasons. Meanwhile, Catholic radio and TV, which allocate the best time of the day for the Mass, have a very limited reach, sometimes confined only to cable television.

More importantly, the Catholic Church has been absolute in its official stance regarding the status of online liturgical celebrations, especially those involving the celebration of the sacraments. On the issue of online liturgies, for instance, it has been clear and unequivocal in stating that "there are no sacraments on the Internet; and even the religious experiences possible there by the grace of God are insufficient apart from *real-world interaction* with other persons of faith" (*The Church and Internet*, no. 9, emphasis added). Despite the

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<sup>4</sup> See my previous articles for a discussion of these stages in the development of the Internet with illustrative examples of religious use of the Internet for each of the stages: "How to Communicate in the Age of Web 4.0?: Challenges and Possibilities for Religions in Asia," *Religion and Social Communication* 14:2 (2016): 106-121. "Digital Expressions, Experiences and Challenges of and for Religions in Asia" *Religion and Social Communication* 16:2 (2018): 105-123. "Internet and Social Media: Bridge or Barrier for a Culture of Communion?" *Landas* 32:2 (2018) 33-59. See also Eilers, *Communicating in Ministry and Mission*, 210-212.

<sup>5</sup> While recorded or so-called "canned" Masses are not explicitly prohibited, the Church is very clear in its preference for live transmissions of Masses. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops explains: "Ideally, the Mass is telecast "live," in real time, as it is celebrated. Here, the viewer is able to join in the prayer of a worshipping community as the liturgy is celebrated. The liturgical days and seasons are respected and the worship setting as well as an actual praying community help the viewer to participate with an attitude of prayerful attention and internal participation." See United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Guidelines for Televising the Liturgy*, <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/frequently-asked-questions/guidelines-for-televising-the-liturgy> (accessed 5 February 2021).

expanding capabilities of the Internet to enable greater and richer interpersonal communication, the phrase “real-world interaction” used here to describe offline contact effectively disparages online connections as inauthentic. Also, by the same statement, it maintains that whatever semblance of sacramental participation remotely done through the Internet, no matter how immersive it may become with the continually evolving technology, is in reality non-sacramental in nature.

Based on this official teaching and contrary to the impression of many Catholics during the pandemic, watching a Eucharist through the Internet, as well as doing so through television or radio, even in real time or through a replay, does not actually count as liturgical participation in the strict sense.<sup>6</sup> Technically speaking, hearing a Mass on radio or watching a Mass on TV or through the Internet is not attending Mass and it does not satisfy the obligation to do so, whether in the case of the pandemic or the case of the sick and other similar cases. In the case of the pandemic in particular, there is actually no more obligation to fulfill, not only where a dispensation from the precept of obligation has been issued, but since the pandemic itself and the quarantine that was imposed have made attendance impossible, as foreseen in Canon 1248 §2. With regard to the sick, the very same Canon applies. They are deemed “*excused* for a serious reason” on account of their condition, as affirmed twice by the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 2181 and CCC 2183). As Charles Pope (2017) simply puts it, “It doesn’t have to ‘count’ since you don’t have an obligation to meet in the first place.” Nonetheless, some argue that watching online Masses, even replays, can have certain spiritual benefits. Diwa says:

This is a great help to grow in prayer and desire for the Holy Eucharist. It’s not a question of ‘blessing’ but of participating in the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ vs. watching a recording of it some other time. Both are genuine sources of spiritual nourishments in this difficult time. (Quoted in Paterno Esmaquel II 2020)

Even the Pope, who presided in what is perhaps the most iconic online liturgy of the entire pandemic in his Extraordinary *Urbi et Orbi* Blessing last March 27, 2020, warned afterwards of a fundamental deficiency in such online liturgies. He elaborates:

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<sup>6</sup> You may want to see another recent article where I tackle the question of the validity and efficacy of online liturgies from a theological perspective: “Cybergrace in Cyberspace?: An Argument for Online Liturgies in the Light of COVID-19,” *Landas* 33, no.2 (2019):1-36.

I say this because someone made me reflect on the danger brought about by this moment that we are experiencing, this pandemic that has made all of us communicate, through the media, through the means of communication, even in matters of religion. Even in this Mass, we are all communicating, but we are not together, spiritually together. The people present here are very few. But there are many people attending: we are together, but not together. Even when it comes to the Sacrament that you are receiving today, the Eucharist; the people who are connected with us only have Spiritual Communion. And this isn't the Church: this is the Church in a difficult situation, which the Lord permits, but the ideal of the Church is always with the people and with the Sacraments — always. (*Homily* 2020)

Here we see how the current Pontiff himself remains very much in line with the ambivalent, if not, negative stance of the Church towards online liturgies in particular and broadcast liturgies by extension. As his former spokesman recalls from the beginning of his papacy, the Pope consistently declined requests to stream his daily Masses at the Vatican online. Fearing the intrusions of cameras, he intended to preserve the simplicity and spontaneity of the liturgical celebration. It was not until the lockdown during the pandemic that he finally agreed to have them livestreamed (Lombardi 2020). Thus, we may say that on the official level the Catholic Church tends to view these liturgical transmissions as mere broadcasts rather than as *teleparticipation*.

### **Liturgical Teleparticipation during the Pandemic**

As quarantine restrictions created obstacles to recording the usual 'canned' television Masses one to two weeks in advance, most broadcast liturgies using radio and television had to stop or shift suddenly to online during the pandemic. Otherwise, some resorted to replays from past years that felt ridiculously irrelevant and out-of-touch with reality as they made no reference at all to the glaring social situation, aside from seeming like illegal gatherings oblivious of mandated quarantine protocols like social distancing and the wearing of face masks. Moreover, as televised liturgies were usually available for Sundays and special occasions such as Christmas and Easter, a lacuna soon became apparent for those with the habit of going to daily Mass. This compelled dioceses and large churches, and eventually even small parishes and communities, to initiate

daily Masses that were streamed online using free and accessible platforms like Facebook or YouTube. As Sanchez (2020) reports, “Physical distancing however has not prevented the Philippine Catholic Church in its apostolate. As the country braced for the pandemic, the Church fully turned to social media, and ‘liturgical televisuality,’ to respond to the faithful’s much needed spiritual nourishment.” Providentially, basic to intermediate skills in using video cameras and sound equipment as well as in editing and livestreaming through the Internet are not so uncommon anymore, especially among younger generations who were quick to form a new ministry where it was previously non-existent. Meanwhile, the Vatican, through the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, would issue two successive Decrees acknowledging the value of such liturgies and at the same time expressing its clear preference for liturgies that are transmitted in real time. The first Decree, “In Time of Covid-19” (2020), affirms that “in this occasion, the means of *live (not recorded)* televisual or internet broadcasts are helpful.” This is repeated once again in a follow-up Decree issued six days later where it instructs, “The faithful should be informed of the beginning times of the celebrations so that they can prayerfully unite themselves in their homes. Means of *live (not recorded)* telematic broadcasts can be of help” (*In time of Covid-19 (II)* 2020).

Nevertheless, the “digital divide” became apparent between dioceses and parishes that could afford the infrastructure and had the necessary skills and those that lacked the resources. This discrepancy was evident in various aspects such as the quality and the stability of transmission, which were dependent not only on the equipment used but also on the Internet connectivity available or affordable to them. Thus, while there were online Masses that looked very polished and professional – as some in fact involved the work of professionals, whether on a paid or volunteer basis – there were also those that looked like ‘home videos’ with very poor image and sound. Even the liturgical setting became a concern as most church buildings proved to be very challenging for more limited or amateur teams especially in terms of acoustics. As such, most of these online liturgies were celebrated not in the main church building but in smaller chapels or even makeshift altars. These, therefore, did not always reflect the beauty and dignity mandated by the Church in her liturgical celebrations, especially in telecast ones, as we have seen above. There were even some priests who would celebrate the Eucharist in their rooms where the sound was better contained but with their bed visible in the background.

As such, it was not uncommon for viewers to prefer broadcasts from dioceses or parishes other than their own, or to follow the papal liturgies instead,

even as a replay. This practice eliminated the advantage of a liturgy transmitted live by one's local church as a more immediate if not more intimate experience, and at the same time one that kept them connected to their local community. This kind of 'shopping around' for online Masses and choosing which ones are better or have more convenient timeslots also gives the impression of commodifying the liturgical celebration and treating the Eucharist just like YouTube clips or Netflix movies, especially in the case of settling for mere replays over live transmissions when these are available. At the same time, church communities may need to realize that such is the dynamics of most netizens and choose to shape up rather than gripe about the reality.

On the other hand, some new technologies, such as live videoconferencing apps like Zoom and Google Meet, that suddenly became popular in their secular use for business or education during the pandemic also seemed to enrich liturgical telecasts and brought them to a whole new level. As of the time of writing, a regular Zoom conference can accommodate as many as 300 participants or up to 3000 with the Large Meeting add-on. These participants will then be able to see, hear and interact with each other in real-time as they pray and sing together, in what is perhaps more approximate to or even already beyond what was miraculously experienced by Saint Clare.<sup>7</sup> Such new affordances somehow compensate for the lack of sense of community that Pope Francis, as quoted in the Homily above, finds to be lacking in online liturgies. Moreover, they also open the possibility for the sharing of ministries among the participants such as the reading of Scripture, the proclamation of the intercessions, or even concelebration where there are several ordained ministers present—something which was not previsible prior to these emergent technologies. In fact, even while using Facebook or YouTube live, which are essentially still one-way transmissions, the actual number of live viewers is flashed in real time, giving people some sense of companionship and belonging to a believing and worshipping community. In this way, they elevate what would have otherwise been a very Web 1.0 experience, not just to Web 2.0 but even to Web 4.0! Still, although this setup potentially enables greater participation,

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<sup>7</sup> Last May 17, 2020, for instance, we had an online Mass via Zoom with some contemporaries from the College Department of San Jose Seminary. The presider led us from Pampanga, the first reading was proclaimed from Makati, the psalm from Quezon City, the second reading from Muntinlupa, the Gospel from Manila, and a priest gave the homily from Makati. Afterwards, a new deacon, ordained only during the pandemic, led the intercessions from Florida, USA. And although our microphones had to be turned off to decrease bandwidth consumption and avoid lagging, there was still much more participation as compared to just "watching" an ordinary online Mass.

there are those who insist that the celebration be confined to one physical space where the liturgy really happens and the others are reduced to mere spectators. In the “RCAM Liturgical Instructions” (2020) sent to the Manila clergy, the then Apostolic Administrator, Bishop Broderick Pabillo, said that

For those using Zoom or any other similar applications that simultaneously live stream participants from different venues, the norm regarding the integrity of the liturgical celebration must be respected. Ministerial participation in the celebration requires physical presence in the place of worship. In the absence of a lector in the place of worship, the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) provides that the priest himself proclaim the readings (GIRM, 59). Please avoid the practice being done by some where the readers, and even the celebrants, are from different locations and they meet only in the online platform. (no. 20)

As quarantine regulations gradually relaxed, online liturgies began to be complemented by the possibility of receiving communion offline in the flesh, thereby enabling fuller participation. Practices in this regard would vary from parish to parish. Some designated communion stations within the parish vicinity that parishioners went to after watching the online Masses. Some would offer ‘drive-through’ communion in the church yard for parishioners who had vehicles or went all the way to bringing the Eucharist to the homes of the faithful. It is good to note that while these practices may seem novel or unorthodox at first sight, Charles Borromeo (1538-1584), during another pandemic in 1576, ordered Masses to be said in elevated platforms strategically located throughout the city so the quarantined faithful could assist in those Masses from the windows of their homes. Afterwards, he called for communion to be brought to the faithful on Sundays at their doorsteps, thus allowing them to receive the sacrament even while on lockdown (Galatolo 2020; Glatz 2020). In fact, this would figure prominently in the saint’s iconography and many popular depictions would show him distributing communion to victims of the Plague outside the confines of a church building. This practice was considerably widespread, as evidenced by the interesting communion implements that are extant from that period like *forçipes* or elongated pincers and *hostienloffel* or hostspoons that help maintain social distancing (Viar 2020).

With the kind of technology that we have in the Internet today, along with its wider reach, the benefits of religious broadcasts listed in *Communio and*

*Progressio* were exponentially magnified in these pandemic online liturgies. Such was the experience during the pandemic, as reported by Alessandro Gisotti, the vice-editorial director of Vatican media, who shared that the papal liturgies that were broadcast online during the quarantine effectively reached out not only to believers but “even agnostics and non-believers,” as gleaned from the feedback that the viewers themselves sent. Based on the same article, almost 5.5 million users registered more than 14.5 million views of these papal liturgies on the Vatican News website between April 5 and 13 alone. According to Gisotti, “Many people, not just the Catholic faithful, were able to follow and ‘encounter’ the Holy Father and, through him, the Word of God thanks to this technology and especially to streaming services and social media” (Quoted in Glatz 2020). Note that Gisotti here uses the word ‘encounter,’ implying a connection or contact much deeper than just watching. Bullivant, a theologian and sociologist, also asserts, “Do not underestimate the power of those words, and of that witness, broadcast to a frightened audience that included many non-Catholics. One of my best friends, an Anglican priest, said, ‘That visual of the Pope in the rain in an empty square with the ‘plague crucifix’ commending the world to God was *incredibly powerful*’” (Bullivant 2020).

On May 20, 2020, Vatican News shared a short video on its Facebook page that showed people from all over the world following the Pope’s daily Mass online during the pandemic. The caption said, “Messages and videos have poured in from around the world to thank Pope Francis for *accompanying* the faithful with his live-streamed daily Masses during these difficult months of COVID-19 lockdown” (Vatican News Facebook 2020). Again, we notice the use of the word ‘accompaniment,’ which suggests that the faithful experienced the closeness and presence of the Holy Father, despite the physical distance. Based on another report, the Pope’s daily Mass was able to attract a live online audience of as many as 6,000 people (Allen 2020). According to the same report, this figure easily rose to about half a million for Italy alone, if one were to include television broadcast. Providing perspective, the article also notes that “the 500,000 figure is high, given the capacity for those attending an open-air Mass in the perimeter of St. Peter’s Square is around 60,000 people. Exceptional events, such as the canonization of John Paul II and John XXIII, attracted 500,000” (Lamb 2020). The kind of feedback and corresponding figures give us a sense of the ordinary people’s ‘reception’ or what is formally termed in theology as the *sensus fidelium* regarding these online liturgies. As one Catholic from England says about her experience of online Masses during the pandemic, “‘Participating’ is the remarkable word here, for this is precisely how it felt,

despite the real spiritual and sensory deprivation of not being physically present” (Davies 2020).

Conversely, a young American shares her first experience of online Mass: “Watching the Mass on my laptop, feet stretched out on my bed, I scarcely felt any sense of participation in the Body of Christ. In fact, I scarcely felt I had participated in anything. There is a vast gulf, I discovered that day, between going to Mass and simply watching Mass the way one watches Netflix. One is a foretaste of heaven; the other is, well, not.” Nonetheless, with the help of some friends, she was later able to find ways to make the experience more spiritually nourishing. One of her friends said, “I think it does have something to do with the fact that we don’t know how to watch anything in a holy way.” Thus, they introduced some variations in bodily posture and even decorated the physical space in order to make it more conducive to prayer and to promote a corresponding inner disposition. The following Sunday, she joined a Mass that used Zoom with more than fifty participants, with sharing of ministries and active participation, and she now had this to say: “I stood, too, in my tiny Bronx apartment, and said, ‘Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ,’ in chorus with dozens of people hundreds of miles away, and I felt the connection I’d been longing for that first week: a union of word, gesture, prayer and time” (Dulle 2020).

Nonetheless, not all reported experiences of online liturgies have been positive. Beattie for instance shares how “the livestreamed official liturgies expose more starkly than ever how male-centered the Eucharist is. Women have been rendered almost redundant by the shift to virtual Masses. Several women say they simply switch off the livestream after the liturgy of the Word because, in the words of one, “it seems to be just a man doing something of which I have no part” (2020, 4). Parvis (2020) echoes the same sentiment, saying, “I felt not only terrible desolation but also naked jealousy. It looked liked some kind of clericalist fantasy: no lay people, and above all no women.” Thus, rather than feeling a sense of community, Parvis relates that it felt like “we watched other people feast on the risen Christ together while we fasted separately from behind an impregnable online wall. It was meant to comfort, but it felt like being shut out of Paradise” (Ibid, 6).

This kind of sentiment however may not be inherent to the online liturgy itself. For one, online liturgies, as with any liturgical celebration, need not be “male-centered” or clericalist and should not be so. In fact, as we saw, the kind of technology that we now have can already enable the participation of women and lay persons in various liturgical ministries even from different venues. On a deeper level, however, the issue has to do with the current official teaching

concerning online and transmitted liturgies. People who are aware of their non-liturgical and non-sacramental status will naturally feel like they are shut out and ‘fasting’ while those who are physically present in the venue of the transmission are feasting on the real Eucharist. In stark contrast, those who do not have this sentiment find the celebration spiritually enriching and nourishing. The online wall may not really be impregnable after all.

### Questions for the New Normal

On May 12, 2020, the Pope’s spokesperson announced the eventual cessation of the online transmission of the Pope’s daily Masses on May 19 as quarantine restrictions were eased, allowing for the resumption of in-person worship. He said, “As he has been able to affirm in recent days, the pope hopes that the People of God will thus be able to return to communal familiarity with the Lord in the sacraments, participating in the Sunday liturgy and resuming, also in churches, the daily attendance of the Lord and his word.” Again, we can sense here an implicit disparagement of online liturgies as non-sacramental and non-liturgical, thereby necessitating a “return” to real sacrament and liturgy (Allen 2020). In a similar vein, on August 15, the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Cardinal Robert Sarah, with a mandate from Pope Francis, addressed a letter to the presidents of episcopal conferences titled, “Let us return to the Eucharist with joy!” (2020). From the title itself, there is likewise an implication that despite their participation in online Masses, the faithful have been away from the Eucharist, and thus the invitation to “return” to it as soon as possible. Should we then stop online Masses as early as we can, and altogether? Soon enough, there were people around the world who expressed how they missed the Pope’s live streamed Masses and called for its resumption. As one priest from Rome comments, “We also have many, many people participating in these Masses from the U.S. and other countries where public Masses are not yet available. And, also from many people who are homebound for many other reasons. It has opened up a new ministry that we never thought we needed to do” (Mares 2020).

The same sentiment appears to be true not only about the continuation of the Holy Father’s live streamed Masses but also about online Masses in general, which appear to respond to a need that may outlast the quarantine that initially made it necessary. Parvis observes, “Many who expect to carry on shielding at

home for a year or more await with sadness the day when the recordings of daily Masses will stop, which have become so central to their lives. Perhaps we could find a way of keeping those unable to return to Mass quickly, or perhaps indeed ever, closer to the centre of the Church's life in years to come" (17). O'Hanlon inquires, "Are we missing something? Surely the fact that more people are online than in Church on a Sunday cannot be ignored? When the virus is defeated, we cannot go back to where we were" (2020, 16). In the Philippines, for instance, a recent survey conducted by a communications consulting company identified Quiapo Church as the top two social media influencer in the country. Its Facebook page, where it regularly streams Masses and other church activities has reached 1.6 million likes and has more than three million followers (Hermoso 2021). This phenomenon attests to the enduring relevance of online Masses even after in-person Church activities have been allowed to resume on a limited scale. Fr. Jerome Secillano, executive secretary of the Committee on Public Affairs of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, was quoted as saying: "These online masses are going to be done not only at the height of the pandemic but even beyond. They will be here to stay because there is a real need" (ABS-CBN News 2021). He issued this statement while health restrictions and the corresponding cap on Mass attendance were already being eased. Also, while there has indeed been a considerable decline in terms of Mass attendance in many faith communities compared to the pre-pandemic situation, even after restrictions have been relaxed, these are not necessarily attributable to online Masses being a competition to in-person ones.

Firstly, it is important to note that the online shift is far from being a Catholic-specific shift. In reality, other faith communities also experienced the need for a sudden shift online.<sup>8</sup> It is only because we were now thrust all of a sudden and forced to cope with an ineluctable transition that has been happening in the world. So much Catholic and religious life has been happening online these days because so much of *life as a whole* has been happening online these days – and even prior! – such that it no longer makes sense, now more than ever, to distinguish sharply between 'online' and 'real' (i.e., offline) life (Bullivant, 45) in an emerging Web 4.0 world. In the Philippines, for instance,

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, the YouTube Channel of Fo Guang Shan Mabuhay Temple's last post prior to the pandemic was nine years ago. During the pandemic, the same YouTube Channel once again became active with prayer services, Dharma lectures and other sangha activities posted and even livestreamed online. See <https://www.youtube.com/user/fgsphilippines>. Curiously, their prayer services are only made available as live events but not retained as recordings.

Internet use has been on the rise and reached an average of ten hours and two minutes a day in 2019.<sup>9</sup> This means that the average Filipino spends most of one's waking hours online rather than offline. Nor can this be dismissed as a temporary phenomenon that would eventually pass when the pandemic ends. As early as 2015, Gould had pointed out a growing fusion of online and offline in the religious sphere (2015, 30). Thus, there is a need for us to become more and more aware of how virtual reality is actually more real than we think, rather than maintain a dismissive attitude towards it.

Secondly, we must admit how many Catholic communities have been quite slow in recognizing and responding to this ongoing online shift, until the pandemic struck. In effect, the pandemic served as a providential jolt to harness the power of these emerging means of communication that has largely stayed untapped. As Bullivant envisions, "One might reasonably prophesy that, finally, our churches will realize how important the internet and digital technology now are. (...) Perhaps for the first time, those in charge of parish communications have had to think seriously about how best to use them to connect with people, whether existing parishioners or anyone else" (41-42). This is also true for other faith communities who are beginning to discover or rediscover the potential of this emerging technology only now. There is still so much that needs to be done to improve, particularly in technical aspects, to better promote liturgical participation. Also, for those who do not yet have online communication mechanisms in place, Bullivant suggests that faith communities should have a broader online communication plan that includes social media, email, text messaging, and online giving (42).

Nonetheless, the most crucial question here is whether the current disposition of the Catholic hierarchy towards online liturgies in particular and remote mediated liturgies in general would be able to shift from one of treating them as mere broadcasts without much real worth to seeing them as valid, legitimate, and efficacious forms of liturgical teleparticipation, and thus harnessing their potential. Otherwise, any progress in technology would only be disparaged by a dismissive and at best condescending stance towards all forms of mediated participation in liturgy, no matter how dynamic, engaging and effective these may be, as experienced by the faithful themselves.

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<sup>9</sup> The latest comparative report on global digital use is available online in <https://p.widencdn.net/kqy7ii/Digital2019-Report-en> (accessed May 4, 2020).

The crux of the matter seems to lie on understanding cyberspace as *real* space.<sup>10</sup> Murray (2012) calls this the ‘spatial affordance’ of the Internet, which Horsfield describes by noting how “mediated communication has taken on the characteristics of an enveloping technological and symbolic environment *within which life is lived*” (2015, 264-265). As virtual reality becomes the normative reality, cyberspace also becomes the new space where people are. Campbell and Garner advise that “the digital environment is not going away in the foreseeable future. Rather, with the proliferation of augmented reality, mobile media, and internet, it promises to grow and become interconnected with our physical environment and to give rise to *distinct digital places or neighborhoods for people*” (2016, 93).

In contrast, there are those who find it difficult to imagine virtual space as sacred or even real for that matter. Sillence, for instance, avers that “the making of a sacrifice requires an altar, from which the sacred species can then be distributed to the faithful. The space on Dr. Jenkins’ desk in front of her computer monitor is not an altar” (2020, 18). The problem here appears to be an inability, if not a refusal, to perceive a space other than physical space. Cyberspace is not a physical space within a device or in front of it. It is a virtual point of convergence where real people are able to gather in a real way to do real things. Even laws now already recognize how actual crimes are being committed in these virtual spaces. If evil then is able to operate in cyberspace, could not grace as well?

Surprisingly, the Church appears to be able to recognize this spatial affordance of the Internet in other areas, but not in liturgy. The Pope, for instance, declared in 2014, “The media can help us greatly in this, especially nowadays, when the networks of human communication have made unprecedented advances. The internet, in particular, offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity. This is something truly good, a gift from God” (Message for the 2014 World Communications Day). Even prior to this, John Paul II called it the “New Areopagus” (*Redemptoris Missio*, no. 37) or new marketplace where people today converge and the best and worst of the world can be found. Benedict XVI also described it as the “digital continent” over a decade ago (44th World Communications Day Message 2010). Presently it is the largest continent in the world with four billion citizens and counting.

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<sup>10</sup> I have tackled this from a theological viewpoint in my article “Cybergrace in Cyberspace?: An Argument for Online Liturgies in the Light of COVID-19” especially in the sections “The importance of the body in liturgy” and “The importance of the cosmos in liturgy” where I try to weigh in on the different sides. Thus, I will focus here instead on the phenomenological and communication dimension.

Thus, the words of Paul VI to the members and *periti* of the Consilium for the execution of the Constitution on the Liturgy in 1970 now appear to be prophetic: “The instruments of social communication are everywhere in today’s society and their even wider use is foreseen in the coming years” (272-274). However, in this era of Web 4.0, not only is the Internet “everywhere in today’s society,” the people of today’s society are also everywhere on the Internet. Thus, if we will not build churches and hold worship “there,” where will they go to find God and worship? This is a challenge not only for Catholics but also for all faith communities.

Beneath the difficulty of accepting cyberspace as worship space seems to lie a concern that online liturgies, if continued, would come to replace physical participation in liturgical celebrations, which is part of a wider concern that the rise of online religion would be detrimental to offline religion (Note, again, that unhelpful distinction!). Bullivant, for instance, warns of a potential decline in Mass goers after the pandemic. One of the reasons that he identifies is the breaking of habit, which once broken, usually turns out difficult to revive. According to him, “This will be especially true if, as seems likely, we will have a long period when people can go to church again, but when being part of a large gathering is still widely viewed, and possibly officially cautioned against, as an ‘unnecessary risk’” (4). Curiously, this is a concern that did not seem to be raised in the case of radio and television broadcasts that were never seen as a threat to onsite Mass attendance. Also, it has to be asked whether what is important is participation itself or the fact that it has to be physical, especially in cases where physical participation is not an actual possibility. Also, given many cases where physical attendance was not even there to begin with, for instance among young Catholics, is online participation not a good entry point for revitalizing the faith in the post-pandemic, as it was during the pandemic?

Hence, there may be a need here to reassess the validity as well as productivity of our anxieties and apprehensions. After all, virtual worship space may not necessarily be in competition or contradiction with physical worship space, and they need not be mutually exclusive. As O’Hanlon argues, “The many who go online to hear a word of God must not be switched off or redirected to the church up the road... They are in a new place of prayer, certainly new to those of us who dwell in pews” (16). He further asserts, “The presence of God-in-Jesus is as real in these new online chapels as in any sacrament, as in any church, as in any tabernacle” (Ibid).

However, without necessarily going as far as to equate in-person with online worship, we should consider a possibility of accommodating and harnessing

both worship modalities in the post-pandemic or new normal setting. Even prior to the pandemic, some faith communities have actually been initiating this process as “a natural evolution of ways to respond to Jesus’ command to proclaim the gospel to all nations,” extending it to the digital frontier (Lytle 2013, 76). While there may be a clear preference and superior regard for in-person worship, there may still be room for online worship to meet specific needs and situation in ways that in-person worship cannot. For instance, we have a relatively more balanced text from the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines titled “Recommendations and Guidelines for the Liturgical Celebration in ‘New Normal’ Condition” (2020), which affirms how “social media has brought us together in spite of the social distancing we imposed on ourselves” while also calling for a clear distinction “between virtual participation and the full participation of the people in our liturgical celebrations.” Thus, while it asserts that virtual participation is not full, it still calls and recognizes worshipping in a virtual space as a legitimate form of participation, without any hint of advocating liturgical teleparticipation as the new status quo or as a substitute for ‘full participation’ in the new normal.

In fact, the two can be complementary in a very beautiful way, such that those who could not be present for valid reasons could continue to be connected to the community’s liturgical celebration and the physically gathered community would be aware of the reality of a faith community that is much wider than their worship space. As Parvis remarks, “The Catholic Church has never been made up solely of those who are able to be physically at Mass” (17). Catholics in fact have long believed in the doctrine of the ‘communion of saints,’ and this may yet be another doctrinal underpinning that can support how the Mass bridges both physical and virtual worlds. As Colleen Dulle (2020) says, “Without the physical communion of the Eucharist or an immediate community, the holy communion that remains to us is the communion of saints: our spiritual bond with not only the saints in heaven, but the profound spiritual connection we share when we pray at the same time as others across great distances, or for the same intentions across time, or even the profound bond we share with others who pray to the same God.”

## **Conclusion**

What was once a miracle for Clare of Assisi has gradually become a reality, beginning with radio in 1931 and more so with the present technologies in this

time of Web 4.0 that have made liturgical teleparticipation not only more vivid and vibrant, but also more dynamic, engaging, inclusive, participatory and intimate. Thus, although the pandemic drastically precipitated a drastic shift to online, which was not always smooth nor pleasant, this transition may actually be opportune, if not long overdue, as part of the organic development of liturgical teleparticipation from radio to the present, bringing us closer and perhaps even further than the original experience of Clare. The leaders of the Catholic Church and of other faith communities would thus do well to reflect on the experience of the pandemic and the positive outcome they can retain and learn from it in the context of the new normal. For instance, the practice of so-called ‘Zoom Masses,’ especially with communion made available afterwards, can perhaps be continued for the sick and elderly, including the significant number of faithful who cannot attend the Sunday Eucharist for valid reasons. This kind of set-up has many obvious advantages as compared to the pre-pandemic staple of canned radio and television liturgies. To return to the previous status quo and abandon in its favor whatever has been achieved so far with online Masses is to go backward. If indeed the Holy Spirit, no less, pioneered liturgical teleparticipation as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century for a saintly nun in an obscure monastery, could we not also trust that the same Spirit is guiding its development today?

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## **Part Two**

### **Local Contexts**

# Neighborhood Change vis-à-vis Challenges of Digital Neighborhood Church post-COVID-19 Pandemic

*Rico C. Jacoba*

## Introduction

It has been observed that the COVID-19 pandemic transformed much of our neighborhood dynamics. To some extent, people learned to transform face-to-face encounters to online interactions, that is, from offline to online. For more than two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, many people say the Internet has been essential to them; many made video calls and used technology in new ways. Technology played a role in this transformation. Some claim that digital interactions could only do so much as a stand-in for in-person communication. They say the interactions they would have had in person but instead had online or over the phone have generally been helpful – but not a replacement for in-person contact. Some claim that these tools have not been of much use in their interactions. Some people, however, claim that these digital interactions have been just as good as in-person contact. Nevertheless, while tech was a lifeline for some, others faced struggles. However, one thing is certain, the pandemic has changed the classical neighborhood interactions, and in the post-pandemic era, neighborhood churches necessitate digital use. These unprecedented impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic stir my interest in studying neighborhood change vis-à-vis challenges in the digital dynamics of neighborhood churches in the post-COVID-19 pandemic.

## What is a Neighborhood?

Given how diverse communities are, it is no surprise that neighborhoods are similarly complex. The crucial feature, though, is ‘living in close proximity.’ According to Petra Kuppinger (2014), “Living in close proximity to one another and engaging with neighbors can result in personal bonds and cultural understandings that are crucial for social possibilities.” These personal connections and cultural understandings are clearly not always favorable. For instance, the ‘parallel lives’ of different groups were underlined in an independent assessment reacting to the racial riots in northern England in 2000 (Cantle 2001). Neighborhoods can be spaces for contestation and conflict in the same way that prayer rooms in universities (Smith 2016) or football stadiums (Brand 2016) can, but the implications of such conflict in a neighborhood can be much more significant because the space is residential and ‘standard churches’ are places that can be walked away from, disengaged with, and ignored. Neighborhoods also serve as places where people live, work, socialize, and educate their children. In the actual and everyday experience of the religious variety, they are increasingly significant. I would argue that the neighborhood is a human scale setting for recognizing and making sense of diversity, which can be favorably facilitated or neglected.

They are places where “meshworks” (Ingold 2011, 15) may be observed in action, where bodies flow in and out of negotiated spaces, connecting distant and close other places, and making sense through interaction. They are also a type of multi-religious place, formed by use and constituency and typically sustained by design and planning. Attention to the experience of the religiously diverse society is both instructive for thinking about neighborhood and valuable for paying attention to the experience of the neighborhood.

## Classic Representation of Neighborhood

There are various discourses among sociologists on the neighborhood in a narrow sense. There are those who “focus on the social meaning of space,” that is, defined by boundaries as perceived by residents (Galster 2001). Some sociologists define neighborhood based on “sentiments of groups of people (e.g., anti-illegal gambling)” (Joireman 2003, 28), others by way of “descriptive typologies” (e.g., ethnicity), based on context and function (e.g., work in the same department) (Gephart Jr 2004), or on topography and demography (e.g.,

lowland, upland). Luc Anselin and Sarah Williams (2016) argued that there is little consensus on how to define neighborhoods. There is, however, some agreement that in a general sense, a neighborhood is a “social/spatial unit of an organization” (Hunter 1974, 117) larger than a household but smaller than a city (Anselin and Williams). Berk (2010) defined neighborhood in terms of subdivisions of urban or rural locations such as cities, villages, and towns. This definition suggests that a neighborhood is a vicinity in which people live. Stated in a simple manner, a neighborhood is a space where “people live next to or near one another in sections of an area and form communities” (Aydın and Siramkaya 2014). Dicle Aydın et al argued that this kind of description represents the “physical or social characteristics” of neighborhood (Ibid). Suzanne Keller affirmed this and further explained that “neighborhood necessarily consists of two fundamental components being physical and psychosocial” (1968, 164). Kent P. Schwirian (1983) elaborated on this idea by specifically pointing out that “the basic fundamentals of a neighborhood are: people, place, interaction system, a shared identification, and public symbols.” Putting the elements together, neighborhoods are spaces where “inhabitants exist in a recognizable section of an urban location whose members are strategically situated in an interface network of formal or casualness and direct their shared identity with the area in public symbols” (Aydın and Siramkaya). Neighborhood is also seen as a “natural area” (Goist 1971). This concept is a basic contribution of Robert Park and his Chicago School associates (Faught 1986). Here, Park argued that:

....natural area involves: (a) a geographic area physically distinguishable from other adjacent areas; (b) a population with unique social, demographic, or ethnic composition; (c) a social system with rules, norms, and regularly recurring patterns of social interaction that function as mechanisms of social control; and (d) aggregate emergent behaviors or ways of life that distinguish the area from others around it. (1925, 278)

There is a degree of social differentiation in lifestyles among individual urbanites and among characteristics of city neighborhoods (1962, 91-92). Social differentiation is proportional to ‘societal scale.’ Societal scale refers to the degree of the dissection of work within the social order and the scope of amplification of integrative mechanisms and establishments arranging on conveyance and communication (100). As societies increase in scale, the

increase in social differentiation is resonated in the mounting attention of inner-city land use and in the community topographies of the populace. There are other scholars who proposed a more inclusive approach in defining neighborhoods. In their article entitled “The Significance of Neighbourhood,” Kearns and Parkinson presented some of these more inclusive approaches. Martin (2003) prefers to speak of neighborhoods as fluid and “based on circumstances or action; because neighborhoods often form to leverage social or political action, they should be considered “flexible, contingent, social, and political products.”

### **Neighborhoods as Interaction Systems**

There are two examples that align with this line of argumentation, i.e., those proposed by Suttles (1972, 78) and Fischer (1982, 76). The ideas in Suttles’ proposal are multi-leveled and accompanied by his conception of typology of a neighborhood. One level in his proposal is anchored on an archetype organization that serves as the primary group of neighborhoods. Another type is a more segmented but regularized set of relations to deal with outside groups and institutions. Moreover, there are also other themes of neighborhood that we can mention. In the works of Olson (1982), there are six themes: “neighborhood as a form of social organization; an ideology; a determinant of behavior; a consequence of social organization; a social network; and a typology.” These six major themes are classified under the categories of ‘social interaction’ that focuses mostly on the lifestyle in the urban subareas (Schwirian 1983). There are other suggested concepts that were popularized by Allen (1980) and must be understood in terms of the changing ideology of urban life. According to this orientation, “Modification of behavior is possible when emerged in one particular social group and stay there in a longer time.” With such a concept of immersion, the neighborhood becomes an essential factor of social control. It is also important to note that when the neighborhood becomes a tool for social control, a subculture develops among neighborhood residents. Consequently, a shared value has now a source of personal identity (Useem et al 1960).

Neighborhoods “come to share values, beliefs, and local knowledge.” This kind of perception was evident in the studies done by Fischer (1971) and Warren & Warren (1977). These works suggest a perspective that neighborhood is a ‘network.’ As a network, it connects all in the community giving the space for

an exchange of ideas, resources, and all other necessary elements to sustain a neighborhood atmosphere. In Warren's terms, he calls it a "proximity anchored helping network" (145). Furthermore, Warren added six neighborhood types: integrated,<sup>1</sup> parochial,<sup>2</sup> stepping stone,<sup>3</sup> transitory,<sup>4</sup> and anomic.<sup>5</sup> His addition was based on two aspects: "the extent and nature of the internal social organization, and the external connection of the neighborhood organization to other outside social systems" (144).

### Classic Representation of Neighborhood Change

From the concept of neighborhood, we now move to 'neighborhood change.' Under the classic perspective are several views about neighborhood change. Hawley in the 1950s understood neighborhood from a demographic or ecological perspective, and focused on "the population and the structured activities developed by population members." The crucial demographic influence affecting change in the formation of neighborhood inhabitants is migration. Another classic model of the neighborhood is the "Socio-Cultural/Organizational" perspective. This perspective primarily sees the neighborhood as "the forms of social relations that evolve within the context of the neighborhood and the attitudes and values of the population." This perspective was advocated by several scholars as early as the 1920s.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Integral-an area where residents (1) have high levels of formal and informal interaction with one another, (2) manifest high levels of contact with local government, (3) show high levels of reported voting in the last national election, (4) have strong commitments to remaining in the neighborhood, and (5) have strong positive attitudes toward the area."

<sup>2</sup> "Parochial-an area where residents (1) have extensive formal and informal interaction with one another, (2) hold positive attitudes toward the neighborhood and (3) do not show high levels of political participation outside their local."

<sup>3</sup> "Stepping-Stone-an area where residents (1) have extensive formal and informal contact, (2) have no pronounced positive reference group orientation in the local area and (3) have extensive participation in the political process of the larger community."

<sup>4</sup> Transitory-an area where there is (1) low reference group identification with the local neighborhood, (2) little formal or informal interaction and (3) participation in the larger community to a moderate or high de

<sup>5</sup> "Anomic-an area where people (1) lack formal and informal ties to the local area, (2) do not have a high level of participation in the larger community and (3) lack strong positive identification to the neighbor

<sup>6</sup> Many of the classic ethnographies by the Chicago School reflect this orientation, see for example (Anderson 1923; Reckless 1933; Shaw 1930; Shaw & McKay 1942; Wirth 1928; Zorbaugh 1929). More recently the work of Suttles (1968, 1972), Hunter (1974b), and Gans (1962, 1967) has enhanced and expanded this perspective.

It is good to note that by having a neighborhood, several service categories and facilities are delivered. The neighborhood provides services like medical facilities, social clubs, recreational (e.g., gyms), cultural, commercial, and religious facilities, etc. These are within reasonable and accessible distance for most residents (Aydın and Sıramkaya). For Kellekci and Berköz (2006), “Neighborhoodness is a zone, which allows social relationships of users.” Kısar and Türkoğlu (2010) proposed that “social relationships such as neighborhoodness and familial relationships are regarded as social networks at a micro-level and these relationships meet the requirements of safety and support in the community at a rudimentary level. Neighborhoodness is an affiliation through which people can interconnect and share their thoughts, resources, and many other essential services for the good of all” (Aydın and Sıramkaya). On the other hand, Şensoy and Karadağ argued that neighborhoodness is a different definition of the fact that a human being cannot live alone. A person is a part of the community and acquires his or her real identity within the community (Ibid).

Moreover, *Life Cycle Model of Neighborhood* of Hoover and Vernon (Edel 1968) and the *Invasion- Succession Model* (Gotham 2002) developed by the Chicago School<sup>7</sup> are two important models of neighborhood change. The terms ‘invasion’ and ‘succession’ were used to denote the processes of neighborhood population alteration (Schwirian 1983). The idea was popular and taken from the field of plant and animal ecology. This metaphorical representation of neighborhood recognizes “in local population composition as a major mechanism by which natural areas change” (Ibid). Park, however, viewed it differently by saying that competition, conflict, and accommodation are the natural processes that characterized the relationships among different populations. “Resistance is a necessary consequence in the Invasion model.” This is a natural reaction coming from socially or racially different individuals. It happens when competition in the local area occurs between the original dwellers and the newcomers. It starts with conflicts of ideas and eventually develops into rivalry. For example, the migrants will find a way to introduce their presence and find their way to live in the locality. If accommodation is not possible, one group will give up and will find their way somewhere. If the newcomers withdraw, the invasion has been halted. If the established population withdraw, their departure, coupled with the continued arrival of the

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<sup>7</sup> Chicago School of Urban Sociology is well-known in 1920s and 1930s, coined the term “invasion and succession” to explain the fundamental way one ethnic or racial group replaces another, accessed July 21, 2021, accessed July 24, 2021, <http://www.ncsociology.org/sociationtoday/coney.htm>.

new group, will result in succession. Researchers simply describe it as “the life cycle as a series of invasion-succession cycles” (Ibid). However, I do not advocate for this model of neighborhood.<sup>8</sup> As human beings, and specially for Filipinos (this will be expounded in the later part of the chapter), we have to promote the inclusivist type of neighborhood.

### **Current Perspectives on Neighborhood Change**

In my experience, I could still remember spending time playing games with my friends and neighbors. The games we loved to play back then seems no longer relevant for this generation in the cyber context. For example, the favorite game “Capture the Flag” is usually played by two teams consisting of six kids (sometimes adults also). Each team has its own territory, and they use neighboring driveways and fences to mark borders. The objective of the game is to secure the “flag” inside its territory while the aim is to get the flag of the other team. To win the game you must steal the opposing team’s flag and bring it to your territory without being apprehended or caught. For you to win the game, you need a smart player and strategic planning because you will be jailed once caught by the opponents (Scholastic nd). Kids in the classic neighborhood enjoy playing this outdoor. Some other neighborhood games are Kick the Can, Steal the Bacon, Manhunt, Statue Maker, Ghost in the Graveyard, and Bad Bunny, etc. (Ibid).

However, today we observe a radical change neighborhood dynamic. From the Google App, there is a downloadable popular android game known as ‘Hello Neighbor’ (Google Play nd). This game is a sneakiness fear game about sneaking into the house of your neighbor to know what horrible secrets he is hiding in the basement. You play against an advanced AI that learns from your every move. The player climbs through the backyard window; however, expect a bear trap there. In the game there is sneaking through the front door, but there will be cameras there as well. If you try to escape the Neighbor will find a shortcut and catch you. This kind of game may somehow illustrate the dynamics of the online neighborhood concepts. Hence, there is a tendency that we do not know neighborhoods when we see them. I agree with Martin’s (2003) claim that “we

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<sup>8</sup> “A few people from one group invade a neighborhood inhabited largely by members of another group, long-time residents begin to move out, more from the invading group move in, and in time the new group succeeds the old,” accessed July 24, 2021, <http://www.ncsociology.org/sociationtoday/coney.htm>

construct them for purposes of our research or social lives, based on common ideals of what we expect an urban neighborhood to be.” The neighborhoods that we define through research or social exchange are always subject to redefinition and contention; they are not self-evident.

The classic concept of neighborhood has been redefined by online networks that have been “progressively prevalent and persuasive whizz (e.g., Facebook, Digg, YouTube)” (Rad 2016). This widespread phenomenon has resulted in the emergence of an online neighborhood (Cui et al 2011). As a working definition in this chapter, an online neighborhood may refer to “a cluster of people interacting with one another in a coherent manner. The interactions can be explicit (e.g., direct e-mail exchange between two users), or implicit (e.g., two users bookmark the same document)” (Ibid). This description of the online neighborhood reflects Garfinkel’s notion of observable interactions (Rawls 2008). Garfinkel argued that observable interactions have two important characteristics: temporal and contextual coherence. If the degree of interaction in the interacting pair is sustained over a period of time, it is classified as temporally coherent. For example, people exchanging e-mails over a sustained period of time counts as being temporally coherent. It is contextually coherent interaction “if they have similar interaction context: time, location, people or objects associated with the interaction” (Sundaram et al 2012). When these dynamics of interaction is sustained, and gradually people become aware of the presence of each other, a community of neighborhood begins to emerge (Ibid).

This phenomenon has evidently reshaped classic concepts of a neighborhood. The socio-economic logic of this dynamic suggests that reduced communication barriers online should bring people together. This dynamic happens in many ways but especially through the exchange of ideas in the bigger communities. However, the downside is that it creates group polarization, which may occur more easily online as like-minded people can find peers regardless of geographical constraints and reinforce each other’s views. It is possible then that this group “separation may result in the domination of a social network by the dominant group” (Fieseler and Fleck 2013). Hence, an important pragmatic enquiry is how the undercurrents of user content group, consumption, and assessment will drive the formulation of shared or deviating perspective online (Rahmandad nd). Homogenization and polarization, which are important issues when we deal with the ‘other/s,’ thrive with the changes brought by new, pervasive, electronic communications media (Ibid). Due to the

nature of the online neighborhood, public opinion is central to online communities.

Furthermore, becoming a neighbor online requires the theoretical and practical skills of visiting the website, posting stories, and voting for stories, and the art of presenting the self as a good neighbor online. In my observation, in the classic neighborhood, power and influence are usually enjoyed by one who is popular and charismatic, but in the online neighborhood, the monopoly of power has been enjoyed by the so-called techno-savvy individuals who can influence and dictate the public opinion as they engage in media. As a result, they create media content for public use (through posting stories they find from the Internet), which is very much like their subjective perception. In turn, many tend to convert more of the neighborhood members, further reducing the diversity of opinions expressed in this neighborhood. The popular term for this is ‘trending.’ Trending topic detection is a fundamental building block to monitor and summarize information originating from social sources (Aiello et al 2013).

### **Neighborhood Churches in the COVID-19 Pandemic**

On March 12, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a pandemic. The coronavirus outbreak led to countries shutting down their borders, businesses, restaurants, bars, and cinemas, canceling social events, school classes, and university lectures, as well as suspending every mass religious worship and religious service (Durbanova 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic shattered the usual religious experience in an embedded place of community worship and liturgical celebration. The lockdown, social/physical distancing, and stay-at-home order ushered a sense of being uprooted from physical public worship that boosts community spirit and sense of being Church. However, the churches of various traditions continued exploring possibilities of caring for and reconnecting with their members, including lost and distant neighbors (Billy Graham Center 2020).

Since in-person public worship was no longer possible in a fixed physical place of worship, the Church responded to the crisis with creativity as a social and religious institution. The Church proposed alternative ways in which congregations can reconnect with the Church and with one another during the lockdown, social distancing, and stay-at-home order (Campbell 2020). Ready or not, Church leaders had to shift from offline worship in person in a physical

space to the cyberspace or digital space where they employed strategies of a) transferring – transferring to online platform an offline liturgy or worship, b) translating – translating worship online with some modification of accommodating elements of interaction as in a talk-show format; and c) transforming – an interactive dialogue style of social relationship in which members share their faith-life experiences and prayers during or after the online service. The first two strategies are usually characterized by one-to-many communication, while the third involves many-to-many interactive communication (Ibid). The online strategies used by the different religious denominations depend on their traditional theology and ecclesiology in their religious rituals. However, being an online church or Church online is predicated on reaching out to the distant neighbor in the digital space where the presence of God is encountered through the cyber-church. Amidst lockdown and social distancing, religious service is carried through different digital platforms on the Internet like television, broadcasting live or pre-recorded worship, live streaming, Facebook Live, E-mails, Zoom meeting, and texting.

The World Health Organization (WHO) argued that religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and faith communities could significantly save lives and reduce illness related to COVID-19.<sup>9</sup> WHO discouraged non-essential physical gatherings and called for organizing virtual gatherings through live-streaming, television, radio, and social media (WHO 2020). The study by Lukasz Sulkowski and Grzegorz Ignatowski (2020) has confirmed that almost all churches and communities were ready to undertake some modifications in their worship practice, while others suspended or drastically reduced their religious practices.

In predominantly Christian Poland, religious leaders of major religious groups decided to suspend their public church-based celebrations, following the Ministry of Health's order at the start of the outbreak – based on their local church traditions (Ibid). The Church Council of the Baptist Church suspended their Sunday services as they felt responsible before God and out of concern for the community. For the Catholic clergy, the call to stay at home and the restrictions on church services arose from love for neighbor. Augsburg and the Evangelical Reformed Church expressed the same reason for the suspension. Their standard pronouncement underlined the concern for health, people's well-being, and the need to stymie the spread of the virus. The suspension of offline celebrations did not hinder their connection with believers. Instead, they used digital technology such as social media, Facebook Live, live streaming,

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<sup>9</sup> For terminology descriptions please refer to [http://data.unaids.org/pub/report/2010/jc1786\\_fbo\\_en.pdf](http://data.unaids.org/pub/report/2010/jc1786_fbo_en.pdf)

public television, radio, broadcasting, and YouTube to remain interconnected (Ibid).

In a survey on how Church leaders responded to the COVID-19 crisis, the sudden shift to digital technology may not be challenging for pastors in larger church communities as they had gone online even before the lockdown. However, small church pastors were challenged with the new reality of ministering online while navigating unfamiliar digital technologies. This challenge is exemplified in the Free Methodist Church in Michigan, consisting of large and small churches. In a Zoom conference among pastors' representatives at the beginning of the pandemic, Steve Evoy's description of his role reflects this point. He claimed, "My role in the Zoom conference was to represent *pastors serving small churches in rural areas who were living in the digital dark ages* (emphasis added)" (Evoy 2020). On the other end, teaching older congregation members how to use digital technology adds to the challenge. In the congregation, the same challenge of interconnecting with and helping older adults, the vulnerable and isolated, surfaced in St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Texas, USA (Elbert 2020, 13). In this respect, the large neighborhood churches were also challenged to take the opportunity to be good neighbors to other small neighborhood churches, as the tech-savvy pastors and younger generation are to the older congregants in using technology online for interconnectivity and religious services (Loewenthal et al nd).

In the United Kingdom, the COVID-19 lockdown prompted the churches, which traditionally did not go online, to shift rapidly from offline services to virtual church services as in other countries worldwide. The spiritual life is normally linked to church attendance in worship, fellowship, and other forms of ministry. In the latter half of March 2020, however, religious buildings in the UK, as in churches worldwide, were closed by government intervention. The lockdown disrupted the routine of communal worship taking place in a commonplace of worship. The ministers must adopt a rapid response to virtually deliver church services to the people navigating the digital space. In the process, the minister's home or office that served as an extension of the church (sacred and secular) was linked virtually to the congregants' home (secular space). This created a kind of 'intersacred' space (homes linked together for common worship space) and an 'infra secular' space (a place used for secular and sacred purposes), a kind of post-secular narrative introduced by Della Dora as cited by Bryson and Davies. With the stay-at-home order, what emerged was the new geography of homes blurring the boundaries between the sacred and the secular, which challenged the pre-pandemic clear separation of spaces for

worship and home, particularly in the UK. Since congregants' homes were transformed into spaces of worship, eventually, these became more inclusive to welcome everyone, including "dislocated visitors who were previously locally embedded but have relocated, or they may be 'strangers from without' who have no direct connection with the congregation" (Bryson et al 2020).

The various neighborhood churches engaged themselves to transition towards virtual service platforms that can be live streamed or recorded to be downloaded or viewed on YouTube anytime as a real-time experience in homes. One advantage of virtual services is that they can be digitally stored and open to all. Congregants were present together through experience and possibly also in time, but not in place. The setting for broadcasting was usually in churches amplified digitally to viewers in homes (Ibid, 361). In support of his argument that the digital neighborhood church is here to stay, Nieuwhof (2020) noted:

...people who were unaware or disengaged from the Church a month ago are leaning in now. I have people in my own life who have attended a service now who never came to a building before. Our Church has seen a 500 percent Sunday 'attendance' spike since the Pandemic grew. And, yes, people are texting in their decision to follow Jesus, and we are opening digital discipleship pathways and groups *for more people than we have ever connected before...* If you care about people in the future Church, you will care about the digital Church (emphasis added).

### **Embracing the Digital Neighborhood Church in the post-Pandemic Era**

Today, as we enter the post-pandemic era, the global community has learned to embrace the digital technology as the new normal mode of being a neighbor. Social media sites (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube) are powerful tools of communication, especially when looking for information. In the digital neighborhood (Moves nd) on a wide variety of real-world events (Becker et al. 2011, 11) specially during the COVID-19 pandemic social media sites are very important sources of information. Heidi Campbell and Stephen Gardner (2012) looked at three areas of the concept of neighborliness in digital space. *First*, they examined how you know who the neighbor in the digital age is. *Second*, they talked about where to locate neighbor; where she or he lives in this digital space. And *third*, they explored how we should treat our neighbors online. This section

focuses on the third question about the new relationships and engagements in this mediated space, which is known as the Internet. It is the question of how the digital space impacts our lives and the way we treat our neighbors. If we are wrapped in media, how do we look at our neighbor? Or how do we look at somebody who shares a common worldview but has a different kind of interpretation? What do we especially do when those narratives about the religious other/s dissuade us from loving our neighbor online?

With this, there are some basic assumptions that I would like to address. The first assumption is that we are wrapped in this mediated world, and that is not always a comfortable world. Learning to understand how technology shapes how we see others as well as how we treat others is an important part of the question. The second assumption is that it is in digital spaces where many people and especially young Millennials and Generation Z encounter religion. They do not encounter religion because they go to a synagogue or church; they encounter rabbi Google or pastor Google and ask him questions. Oftentimes, during the pandemic, when I talked to students, they shared how they met people of other religions online first before they had a face-to-face connection with them. These digitally mediated experiences of the “other/s” become important in how they see religion. The third assumption is that the Internet can either bring us together or divide us (DiMaggio and Hargittai 2001). Unfortunately, we live in a world where online discourse about religion is often very uncivil and vitriolic. It is important how we deal with the situation where the screen creates a kind of openness but also the space that is highly contested, hostile, and problematic.

According to Ron McGivern (2016), traditionally, a basic question in a traditional neighborhood is “how many of our neighbors do we encounter as we do our daily activities?” However, the Internet mediated way of living has reshaped this question. Perhaps the question that we ask now is, “how many ‘friends’ do you have on Facebook? Or how many followers do we have in our YouTube account? The way we interact with ‘other/s’ has been radically changed by technological use” (Little et al 2016). McGivern argued that the concept of ‘friend’ has been turned into a verb and has made it possible to share mundane news to people who might not even know you. Through Facebook, it is now very easy to find and re-connect to those long-lost friends that we have. We can now easily know their whereabouts. Through LinkedIn and various social media platforms, we can market ourselves professionally to the business community online.

## Representations and Challenges of the Neighbor in Internet Memes

New media provide symbolic resources which shape how we imagine the neighbor/s (Pickering 2001). It is, however, unclear how the increased visibility of the neighbor/s through the Internet truthfully reflects themselves or only the ways in which they imagine themselves. It is not also clear if the consequences of their self-representation are positive. Orgad explains:

Private lives are projected publicly: more and more people are making their selves the objects of scrutiny, and engaging in a work of complex, ongoing introspection that involves naming, expressing, talking about, arguing over, negotiating and justifying their emotions [...] Through its projection on to mediated spaces, such as reality TV, Facebook or video and image-sharing sites, the self becomes a domain subject to public gaze. (2012, 158)

The inclusion of the private life in the public space is reflected in the developing digital storytelling movement, where people take advantage of available digital tools to share stories (Mattar 2015). Internet memes are a great way to study how people look at the ‘neighbor/s’<sup>10</sup> and how they think about the ‘neighbor/s’ in a digital context. Internet memes or meme is a concept that was developed by Richard Dawkins (2016, 54) in his book *The Selfish Gene*, where he used a biological terminology to describe how people and how ideas emerge in society. For him, a meme is just an idea that is easily understood by others and can be easily spread. Working from Dawkins’s initial conception, the term ‘meme’ can mean almost anything. Hence, memes may come in the form of a song, or could be a fashion trend, or it could be a statement or slogan that gets spread on the Internet. By limiting the scope of what is meant by ‘Internet meme,’ the goal is not to create a basis for invalidating the widespread use of the term but rather to provide an inclusive method for accounting for and relating the various phenomena labeled as such. These memes have a specific character; they are both textual and visual. Memes are an online form of communication, and they use images. The narrative discussion on memes is important because they reflect not just religion but also politics, social trends,

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<sup>10</sup> When I use the word “other” I am using it in the concept which was discuss in the writings of Enrique Dussel, as well as the elaboration of Levinasian Other in cyber-context by authors such as Richard Cohen, Laurie Johnson, Benda Hofmeyr, and Agnes M. Brazal.

and even just how people see a celebrity, and, in our culture, they showcase how people express their lifestyle. The important aspect of studying memes is that they are very fluid and creative. If you have a good access to the Internet and you have about 60 seconds, you can create a meme through a meme generator online.<sup>11</sup> There are many forms of memes online, but because of the nature of digital communication, it is not easy to track down who the author is. Heidi Campbell argued that memes, in some ways, are the perfect postmodern text because it does not matter what the author says; what is important is how the audience experiences it. It is from this participatory culture that the meaning is derived. Hence, the online representation of ‘neighbor/s’ can be both authentic and inauthentic. Authentic representation involves keeping one’s social media presence real with memes representing the self in a positive, interesting, and engaging way. Being honest is an important part of connecting with the ‘neighbor/s’ online. In the mediated presence, more than ever, the ‘neighbor/s’ as consumers are seeking authentic experiences. Being real and creating an authentic self can forge a deeper connection with the other/s as consumer. This act of authentic presence will not only encourage loyalty among online users, but it will also strengthen bonds in the online neighborhood. It’s about the relationship between the other as a self and other/s as neighbor, and honesty will build a good relationship, allowing the online neighborhood to secure harmonious and valuable attention and engagement.

This pandemic crisis accelerated engagement with live streaming services. For Bogle (2020), this current crisis has created an excellent opportunity for the Church to engage in creating networked communities with the mission “to include those on the edge of faith...those who are not far from the Kingdom of God...who have been disengaged or disconnected from Christianity.” In the post-pandemic era, failure to devise creative ways of reconnecting with these people may lead to losing them in the end, including the few who remain. Bogle argued that it is high time “turning the month’s flavor into a staple diet” (9), implying that connection with the people established digitally during the pandemic must be sustained after the pandemic in order to promote religious and social interconnectivity without neglecting the traditional church services.

Coming from an Indian Country and Rural America, John Floberg (Episcopalian Priest, Standing Rock Church, Iowa) expressed his affirmation of the offline liturgical celebration while citing the benefits of online services. His only concern is the limiting factor of going online, which is the exclusion of

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<sup>11</sup> “Meme Generator the Fastest Meme Generator on the Planet. Easily add text to images or memes,” accessed December 18, 2020, <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>

church members who cannot afford computers, TVs, and smartphones as well as the lack of a reliable internet connection. He further observed that even if people “view” the online services, a “significant percentage are not watching the whole thing” (Floberg 2020, 17-18). However, he profoundly appreciates Zoom meetings or worships over Facebook Live, enhancing interaction among liturgical celebrations.

According to David Silverkors (Parish Priest, Catholic Uppsala Diocese, Sweden) in the general religious landscape in Europe, including Sweden, people are increasingly disconnecting themselves from organized traditional religion. However, in Sweden, the worshipping community disconnected by the COVID-19 pandemic sought out the Internet for services. Although it is not his parish’s usual tradition to go online, he later realized that the online community is as genuine, honest, and authentic as the offline congregation. Besides, the opportunities of live streaming services during the crisis and doing so in the future will benefit neighbors who have no opportunities to participate in the local church services due to problems related to health, lack of time, and geography (Silverkors 2020, 41-42).

Stephen Garner (Dean and Lecturer in Theology at Laidlaw College, New Zealand) perceived the pandemic’s current reality as throwing Christian churches’ traditional practices into the digital space. Although many churches have gone full swing in creating church websites, worldwide telecast services aided by satellite making their presence in social media, many churches are also having a tough time connecting with their community members or engaging with them creatively in digital space. As much as the Church tries to deliver church services online, Garner pointed out that administering sacraments that require an element of physicality is hard and even impossible as in the case of the consecration in the Eucharist that requires the physical presence of a priest and the bread and wine. Likewise, anointing of the sick with oil requires physical contact with the infirm. The impossibility of translating these sacraments online causes anxiety among church members. The recipients of these sacraments are also neighbors in the Christian community (Garner 2020, 53-55).

Matthew John Paul Tan (2020) acknowledged the Church’s significance in going online to reach out to those on the byways. Initially, he held that embarking on the bandwagon mentality of making a digital presence for the Body of Christ online would result in the Church’s center of gravity’s shift leading to its narrowed conception. He argued that the touchstone of ecclesial life is anchored in the embodied communion and the parish’s sacramental life. Furthermore, he asserted that “a presence with nobody is no presence at all, and

this applies to both my neighbor and my God.” However, he later realized the weakness in his reasoning. “What I also did was collapse the presence of Christ into the embodied communion and made that link the sole criterion of faith and the presence of God” (77-78). Tan’s realization finds its root in John’s Gospel (Jn 1:1-10), which underscores that everything was created through the Incarnate Word of God and that the presence of Christ pervades all creation, including digital creation. In short, during this temporal lockdown, we who have been in communion with the Eucharistic Christ become the point of unity, the face of the digitized Christ’s presence in the cyberspace until such moment when everything comes face-to-face with Him (79).

As an authority in communication within the church context, Moises Shardelotto<sup>12</sup> underlined the significance of the communication process in transmitting religious celebrations/worship online. For most religious groups, the default response was more liturgical or para-liturgical rites in the digital space to bridge the isolation gap. This transmission of liturgical or para-liturgical rites is relevant in broadcasting and live streaming through Facebook Live, TV, and radio. However, there is a danger of media clericalism or “clericalist exhibitionism.” There is a tendency to forget that the “other” on the other side of the screen is a person with a “face,” not just an object or passive spectator or another number for viewing rates. In going online, Shardelotto pointed out that:

...it is necessary to take into account the communicational and interactional process that is established in the digital environment...this is essential to help the faithful live the rite and experience the sacred...more important to make it possible to build networked interpersonal relationship and not just gather ‘people to listen’ or ‘people to see’ ...in order to establish a *humanized and humanizing relationship with human persons*”(emphasis added). (2020, 71-73)

Thus, he further reiterated, citing Campbell and Garner, that engaging in an online community is meant to augment, not replace, offline liturgical experience (Ibid, 73). The current COVID-19 pandemic challenges digital literacy among pastors, as Katherine G. Schmidt has noted. The transition to virtual ministry in some parishes may be easy as they have been engaging in live streaming and recording liturgical services before the crisis. In other parishes,

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<sup>12</sup> “Moises Shardelotto is a Ph.D. in Communication Sciences, and Assistant Professor at Unisinos University, Brazil.”

however, the pastors and lay ministers scrambled to transmit their distanced neighbor-parishioners' services. This phenomenon is reflected in the results of an initial survey of over 1,500 pastors in America, which found that a significant percentage of pastors felt "forced" into transitioning online but later began to have a hand on the new technology (Campbell 2020). Let us recall that in 2002, the Pontifical Council for Social Communication (PCSC) promulgated a short document outlining the "opportunities and challenges" of the Internet and with a recommendation that those involved in Church ministries, beginning with Church leaders, get media education for use in their work.

Schmidt recommended that digital life is not just an appendix to post-COVID-19 pandemic life's integral component (2020, 74-76). The post-COVID-19 pandemic seems to picture the frenzied pastors and ministers as "exiles" desperately needing technological reconnection in the present digital space. However, Williams-Duncan and Oliver (2020), Rector of Episcopal Church and Teacher at Church Divinity School of the Pacific, California, respectively, figuratively made a positive note for pastors who were trying their best to navigate the cyberspace technological landscape:

When there was no other way to be present to their congregations, these leaders entered a strange land and discovered they could still sing the Lord's song (Psalm 137). We believe those who have learned to flourish in digital exile will find their ministries enriched when returning to Jerusalem and continuing to practice their new competencies.

### **A Challenge from One-to-Many to Multilateral Communication**

The 'neighborhood' or sense of community is fostered through multilateral communication. Some online churches simply transfer normal in-person worship service online or translate it by modifying worship rituals and space to fit onto a limited screen. These simply retain the Web 1.0, one-to-many mode of communication from the religious authorities to the faithful. Cyber networks encourage multilateral, participatory, interactive, multi-way, horizontal communication. Neighborhood churches capitalize on this to transform public worship online as an opportunity to rethink the essence of the church and what church members need. For instance, a 'fireside chat model' has been adopted by some neighborhood churches. This strategy enables ordinary faithful and

Christian believers to have an in-depth one-one dialogue and sharing about faith. Pam Smith, the author of *Online Mission and Ministry*, explained:

Jesus often encountered people individually. Social media gives us the same personal access to people. This provides a much more realistic picture of the Church as a collection of followers of Jesus rather than a monolithic organization that occasionally pronounces unfavorably on contemporary society and is, in turn, judged by its organizational failures. This is an every-member ministry, and it is exciting and inspiring.<sup>13</sup>

In his speech on World Communication Day, Pope Francis (2019) pointed out that the Church is a “social network” and underscored the need to transform online networks built on surface “connections” into real human communities that reflect “the foundation and importance of our relationship.” For Pope Francis, the Church as a social network highlights the connection of our common faith, in which “we are members of each other” (Ephesians 4:25) and an image of the Trinity. He positively concluded his message: “[T]he Church itself is a network woven by Eucharistic communion, and the unity in it is not based on ‘like,’ but based on truth. Through the Internet, everyone is attached to the body of Christ and welcomes the other/s as a neighbor.”

Through Internet the neighborhood church can be regarded as a “technological communion” (da Silva 2020) with a sacramental presence as well. Communion of online communities is a communion of real presence mediated by digital technology. Internet-mediated messages like an ‘I love you’ text message is genuine. For instance, in the cyber-church, in online worship, or a video conference call with 60 or more participants in the Zoom screen, each participant in the proper disposition of worship celebrates with proper guidelines from the official liturgical book. Will this not be considered valid and actual worship to God? I believe this is an authentic worship with no difference from the celebration in the physical church building. There are disagreements about this. Nevertheless, I argue that a video conference call is an extension of known relationships of the communion of communities. In Zoom, the real presence of the Triune God can joyfully be celebrated in the cyber-church neighborhood of other/s.

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<sup>13</sup> “How Social Media is Changing the Church,” The Conversation, Google, last modified May 5, 2016, <https://theconversation.com/how-social-media-is-changing-the-church-57405>.

## Concluding Remarks

There is a rapid change in neighborhood specially propelled by the COVID-19 pandemic. The use Internet during the COVID-19 pandemic became an indispensable necessity to maintain neighborhood connectivity. The COVID-19 pandemic redefined our being neighbors from a casual face to face interaction to Internet mediated communication. This reality postulated challenges that a lot of us, especially those who are not digitally connected and techno-savvy to cope. As Internet penetration increases, neighborhoods are now facing the challenges of the ‘digital divide.’ Inequality between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ differentiated by dichotomous measures of access to or use of the new technologies is evident. There is also inequality among persons with formal access to the Internet.

As we enter the era of post-pandemic, we realize that the most challenging reality in the neighborhood churches is the occurrence of ‘digital divide.’ There is an uneven distribution of or quality access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) in society. More than 4 billion people, mainly in developing countries, still do not have access to the Internet. That means more than half of the world’s population is missing out on the life-changing benefits of connectivity (WEF 2016).

In the post-pandemic era it is highly recommended, that Internet access must be made available for all specially “to less advantaged groups, either directly or at least by linking it with lower-cost traditional media.” The “[c]yberspace ought to be a resource of comprehensive information and services available without charge to all, and in a wide range of languages. Public institutions have a particular responsibility to establish and maintain sites of this kind (Ethics in Internet, No.10).

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# Prophetic Dialogue and Pastoral Communication post-COVID-19 Pandemic in Vietnam

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic began as an epidemic, which broke out in December 2019, in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. Since then, the world has not had a peaceful day, and the pandemic has become an unprecedented disaster for humanity. No one can deny the danger and consequences that this crisis has been causing. The mass media continue to constantly talk about the spread and outbreak of the disease with statistics on global COVID-19 infections and deaths constantly being updated. In the early days of the pandemic, there was incessant warning and information on how to prevent the spread of the virus. Especially harrowing were the dramatic images of lonely deaths and hurried funerals with no one to see the victims off, which caused the people to feel shocked, worried, scared, and even desperate (Tornielli 2020, 3-6). The COVID-19 pandemic has not only caused human and material losses, but it has also brought on serious challenges in various aspects of life: economy, politics, culture, religion, and family life. Things that have always been thought to be natural and immutable in human society have been turned upside down by COVID-19, for example, "the way we relate with others at work, how we manage our emotions, study, recreation, prayer, even the possibility of attending Mass" (Ibid, 3). However, according to Pope Francis, "The brutal and unforeseen blow of this uncontrolled pandemic forced us to recover our concern for human beings, for everyone, rather than for the benefit of a few" (*Fratelli Tutti* - FT, no. 33). In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic is like a warning to wake humanity up to humbly recognize the truth that "we gorged

ourselves on networking, and lost the taste of fraternity [...] Prisoners of a virtual reality, we lost the taste and flavour of the truly real” (Ibid). We therefore need to “[realise] our own limitations, [...] the more urgent that we rethink our styles of life, our relationships, the organization of our societies and, above all, the meaning of our existence” (Ibid).

Amid global suffering brought about by the crisis, Vietnam has not been exempted. Sharing a border with China, the coronavirus entered Vietnam quite early and broke out very quickly.<sup>1</sup> As of this writing in the end of 2021, Vietnam is facing the fourth wave of the disease with major consequences brought upon the entire country. In these changing and challenging circumstances, the followers of Christ cannot stand on the sidelines because the Church has in countless documents affirmed the desire to be in solidarity with the poor and the suffering. However, the question is, as disciples of Christ, how will we respond to the COVID-19 pandemic? In other words, what will the pastors do to bring people comfort and peace to alleviate the pain and fear which they are facing? This chapter aims to present a few reflections from the Vietnamese COVID-19 experience for post-pandemic pastoral communication practices. Of course, within the scope of this chapter, I have no ambition to provide a satisfactory answer or a perfect method to the pastoral question. Rather the goal is just to put forth a few suggestions that could be applied in future pastoral communication practices. In my opinion, the pastoral communication approach that we can apply to the post-COVID-19 situation in Vietnam is: *prophetic dialogue with reality*.

## Vietnam’s Pandemic Experience

### 1. The Situation of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Vietnam and Government Response

According to the Vietnamese government, the coronavirus officially entered Vietnam on January 23, 2020. Administrators of Cho Ray Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City confirmed the first two COVID-19 patients in Vietnam were a couple of father and son from Wuhan. Vietnam had its first case of domestic transmission on February 1, a 25-year-old woman from Khanh Hoa Province,

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<sup>1</sup> The first confirmed case of COVID-19 infection in Vietnam on January 23, 2020 (from [https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C4%90%E1%BA%A1i\\_d%E1%BB%8Bch\\_COVID-19\\_t%E1%BA%A1i\\_Vi%E1%BB%87t\\_Nam](https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C4%90%E1%BA%A1i_d%E1%BB%8Bch_COVID-19_t%E1%BA%A1i_Vi%E1%BB%87t_Nam); accessed on March 3, 2022).

who had come in contact with the receptionist who had come in contact with the Chinese father and son. On February 12, Vinh Phuc Province in Northern Vietnam decided to isolate the entire Son Loi Ward, Binh Xuyen District because local infections were discovered in the area.<sup>2</sup> Up to now, Vietnam has had more than 1,778,976 people infected with COVID-19 with 33,021 deaths from COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> This number, however, continues to be updated hourly without knowing what the final totals will be. While compared with global totals, Vietnam's infection and death rate is relatively small; however, this reality has not made the Vietnamese people any more at peace with the crisis.

On March 17, 2020, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc declared in a meeting with officials across the country that "the COVID-19 still exists here and there in other countries, even in ASEAN." This means that the country must be prepared because the COVID-19 pandemic can surge in Vietnam at any time.<sup>4</sup> The words of the former Prime Minister of Vietnam have come true because at this time, Vietnam is going through a massive fourth wave. Vietnam's current experience with the pandemic shows that it must always be vigilant about the risk of an outbreak of COVID-19 in the future.

Vietnamese people did not feel great intrepidity in the beginning when COVID-19 was only localized in China. However, when the disease widely spread to Europe (Anh Thu<sup>5</sup> 2020), the Vietnamese people seemed to wake up. When COVID-19 officially appeared in Vietnam, the state of fear, confusion, and anxiety began to take hold. The state mass media and social networks were full throttle in propagating information about the dangers of the disease and provide guidelines for its prevention. Local and national leaders called on the people to be aware of their responsibility for disease prevention. On March 31, 2020, the head of the Vietnamese government issued 'Directive 16' calling for nationwide lockdown for 15 days to prevent COVID-19, from 0:00 AM on April 1, 2020.<sup>5</sup> During that time, all social activities with large gatherings,

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<sup>2</sup>[https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C3%B2ng\\_th%E1%BB%9Di\\_gian\\_c%E1%BB%A7a\\_%C4%91%E1%BA%A1i\\_d%E1%BB%8Bch\\_COVID-19\\_t%E1%BA%A1i\\_Vi%E1%BB%87t\\_Nam](https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C3%B2ng_th%E1%BB%9Di_gian_c%E1%BB%A7a_%C4%91%E1%BA%A1i_d%E1%BB%8Bch_COVID-19_t%E1%BA%A1i_Vi%E1%BB%87t_Nam) (accessed on March 7, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> <https://covid19.gov.vn> (accessed on March 7, 2022)

<sup>4</sup> Government Communication Department, "*Thủ Tướng Nguyễn Xuân Phúc Chủ Trì Họp Trực Tuyến Toàn Quốc Về COVID-19 [Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc Chaired an Online Meeting Between the Government Standing Committee and the National Steering Committee for COVID-19]*" ([https://moh.gov.vn/tin-noi-bat/-/asset\\_publisher/3Yst7YhbKA5j/content/thu-tuong-nguyen-xuan-phuc-chu-tri-hop-truc-tuyen-toan-quoc-ve-COVID-19](https://moh.gov.vn/tin-noi-bat/-/asset_publisher/3Yst7YhbKA5j/content/thu-tuong-nguyen-xuan-phuc-chu-tri-hop-truc-tuyen-toan-quoc-ve-COVID-19), accessed on March 7, 2022).

<sup>5</sup>[https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C3%B2ng\\_th%E1%BB%9Di\\_gian\\_c%E1%BB%A7a\\_%C4%91%E1%BA%A1i\\_d%E1%BB%8Bch\\_COVID-19\\_t%E1%BA%A1i\\_Vi%E1%BB%87t\\_Nam](https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C3%B2ng_th%E1%BB%9Di_gian_c%E1%BB%A7a_%C4%91%E1%BA%A1i_d%E1%BB%8Bch_COVID-19_t%E1%BA%A1i_Vi%E1%BB%87t_Nam) (accessed on March 7, 2022).

including religious activities, were stopped. Schools, sport, restaurants, bars, and entertainment venues were ordered to temporarily close. Churches, temples, pilgrimage centers could no longer receive visitors. Funerals were to be held hastily without mourners in attendance while hospitals were always in a state of readiness to deal with the admission of patients. Field hospitals and isolation wards sprang up everywhere to prepare for an outbreak. Doctors, medical staff, and volunteers were fully mobilized to help potential COVID-19 patients. The Health Ministry also sent countless warning messages to the people to promote preventative measures (MOH 2021). Despite the early success in Vietnam's fight against the pandemic through information and vaccination campaigns, it could not keep COVID-19 from wreaking havoc on the people, and has experienced multiple waves. However, in some ways, Vietnam has avoided much damage and loss compared to many other countries in the world.

## 2. The Response of the Vietnamese Church to COVID-19

Immersed in the spirit of the Vatican Council II, the Vietnamese Church does not consider itself an outsider, but has realized its role and responsibility in the prevention of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic worldwide, especially in the territory of Vietnam. Indeed, the Vietnamese Church is convinced that:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds. (*Gaudium et Spes* - GS, no. 1)

Therefore, when the COVID-19 crisis broke out, the Vietnamese Church had timely responses to accompany the nation during the pandemic. In other words, the Vietnamese Catholics have realized that this is the time for them to manifest the spirit of the Gospel, "living the Gospel in the heart of the nation to serve the nation's happiness" (CBCV 1980). As early as February 2, 2020, the Standing Board of the Vietnam Bishops' Conference quickly issued a notice to

the entire community of God's people to call for joint prevention against disease. The content of the notice included two main points: First, it called on "the faithful communities to pray, asking God to grant scientists the ability to soon find a medicine to stop the pandemic, and ask Him to heal those suffering from the disease, and save people from getting infected by this disease." Second, the announcement introduced some disease prevention measures. For example, when attending Mass, "people only receive Communion in their hands instead of their mouth;" "people with symptoms of cough and fever should not attend Mass and may receive spiritual communion;" and "limit as far as possible festivals and mass pilgrimages during a time when the pandemic has not been contained" (CBCV 2020).

Following the announcement of the Vietnamese Bishops' Conference, diocesan offices across the country simultaneously issued pastoral letters to call on the community of God's people to pray and join hands to fight COVID-19. For example, on February 3, 2020, Bishop Joseph Dinh Duc Dao, Diocese of Xuan Loc, issued a "Common Letter" calling on all the faithful in the diocese to conscientiously implement the recommendations of the Standing Committee of the Vietnamese Bishops' Conference. At the same time, he also offered pastoral instructions appropriate to the diocese's present context (Joseph Dinh Duc Dao 2020). Several days later, Bishop Paul Nguyen Thai Hop (February 8, 2020), Diocese of Ha Tinh, issued a notice calling on the community of God's people in Ha Tinh and Quang Binh provinces to pray. The notice also gave specific pastoral instructions to be carried out during the crisis.

In the "Pastoral Letters of Lent 2020," in addition to explaining and encouraging the faithful to live the spirit of Lent, the Bishops also dedicated a part of the letter to mention the dangers COVID-19. The bishops called on the community of God's people to persevere in prayer to ask God to heal and quickly push back the pandemic. At the same time, they gave instructions to help the faithful know how to prevent the spread of disease in the community. When the pandemic began to surge in Vietnam, the Vietnamese bishops continued to issue announcements as pastoral instructions to join hands with the nation to deal with the crisis. On March 19, 2020, Archbishop Joseph Nguyen Nang issued a very detailed "COVID-19 Pastoral Guidance" for the entire Archdiocese of Saigon. The letter ordered the suspension of "all activities such as: catechism classes, celebrations, pilgrimages, flower offerings." In addition, it instructed the people to wear masks in all public gatherings, to reduce the number of servers and choir members in liturgical celebrations, to observe social distancing, to make hand sanitizer available at churches, to

discontinue providing holy water at the church entrance, and to carry out regular cleansing of churches (Joseph Nguyen Nang 2020). The document also mentioned how to celebrate and attend Mass, receive Communion, confess, meditate, etc., during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar to the Archdiocese of Saigon, all other dioceses in Vietnam have simultaneously issued COVID-19 pastoral guidelines depending on the circumstances of their diocese.

When Vietnam experienced an especially serious wave in the months from April to August 2021, the dioceses, parishes, and religious orders across the country organized relief shipments. A large contingent of priests, religious and lay people volunteered to serve in makeshift hospitals and isolation wards. The Archdiocese of Saigon alone sent more than 719 volunteers to work in different field hospitals and isolation areas. Thus, we can say that in addition to the responses of the civil authorities, the Vietnamese Church has also made positive contributions to the effort to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. Vietnamese Catholics are clearly aware that the prevention of and fighting against COVID-19 is not only a duty and responsibility of all citizens of the country, but more importantly, as a mission of all Christians.

## **Prophetic Dialogue**

It can be said that 'prophetic dialogue' is a very special term of the Society of Divine Word. However, before getting into the details of the origin and content of this phrase, let us take a quick look at what 'dialogue' means and what the Church's documents have to say about it.

### **1. Defining Dialogue**

In common sense, 'dialogue' is "back and forth talk between two or more people." At the same time, dialogue also means "directly discussing and negotiating with each other between two or more parties to resolve disputed issues" (Institute of Linguistics 1997, 327-328). This means that, in a dialogue, there must be a speaker and a listener. The instrument of dialogue is language. The purpose of dialogue is to find a consensus between two parties. In philosophy, dialogue means "the exchange of ideas in the search for truth. It is often 'critical,' by presenting the opposing arguments of an opinion. Through comparison and consideration, the matter will be clearer" (Phan Tan Thanh 2014). Thus, dialogue refers to the meeting between two people.

Theology understands dialogue in a deeper and broader way. First, dialogue comes from God himself. In other words, God is the source and cause of all dialogue. He began his dialogue with man before man when man could not speak (Gen. 1-11). This is a dialogue rooted in love and for love, the ‘dialogue of salvation’ (*colloquium salutis*) (*Ecclesiam Suam* – ES, no. 1). This dialogue culminates in Christ Jesus (*Verbum Domini* – VD, no. 11). Today, the Church continues this saving dialogue by establishing a new dialogue between the Church and the world. According to Pope Paul VI, the dialogue between the Church and the world is a proclamation of the Gospel of salvation. The Church not only proclaims the Gospel with words but also with actions – by witness. In many situations, the Church cannot ‘dialogue’ with words, but continues to ‘dialogue’ in silence with an attitude of love (ES, nos. 60-123). Thus, from a theological perspective, ‘dialogue’ has been understood by the Church in a broader sense and with its own particular language and mode of communication.

## 2. The Teachings of the Church on Dialogue

The first official Church document in which the term ‘dialogue’ (the Latin version uses *colloquium* instead of *dialogus*) appears is the Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*. This Encyclical is seen as a guideline to the Church's dialogue with the world. At the same time, it guides the drafting of documents of the Second Vatican Council and the pastoral direction of the pontificate of Pope Paul VI. According to *Ecclesiam Suam*, our relationship with God and with the world is the basis of dialogue. The Church's dialogue with the world is an extension of this dialogue. Therefore, for dialogue to be effective, the Church needs to return to her true origin (*consciousness*), through which she draws a new source of life (*renewal*) and goes out to encounter the world (*dialogue*). Thus, the Encyclical declares:

Here, then, ... is the noble origin of this dialogue: in the mind of God Himself. Religion of its very nature is a certain relationship between God and man. It finds its expression in prayer; and prayer is a dialogue. Revelation, too, that supernatural link which God has established with man, can likewise be looked upon as a dialogue. In the Incarnation and in the Gospel it is God's Word that speaks to us... Indeed, the whole history of man's salvation is one long, varied dialogue, which

marvelously begins with God and which He prolongs with men in so many different ways.

This relationship, this dialogue, which God the Father initiated and established with us through Christ in the Holy Spirit, is a very real one, even though it is difficult to express in words. We must examine it closely if we want to understand the relationship which we, the Church, should establish and foster with the human race.

God Himself took the initiative in the dialogue of salvation. "He hath first loved us." We, therefore, must be the first to ask for a dialogue with men, without waiting to be summoned to it by others. (ES, nos. no. 70-72)

Inspired by *Ecclesiam Suam*, the Second Vatican Council produced the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*. The Constitution was designated as 'pastoral,' and the term was understood by the Council to mean 'dialogue.' Indeed, right in the opening sentence of the Constitution, the Council clearly asserts that the Church is not removed from the world but shares in all the joys and sorrows that humanity faces in its earthly existence. For this to happen, the Council realizes that it "can provide no more eloquent proof of its solidarity with, as well as its respect and love for the entire human family with which it is bound up, than by engaging with it in conversation about these various problems. The council brings to mankind light kindled from the Gospel and puts at its disposal those saving resources which the Church herself, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, receives from her Founder" (GS, no. 3).

Recently, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis devoted a rather lengthy section (no. 238-258) to describe the meaning of 'dialogue.' According to Pope Francis, for dialogue to be the way for evangelization, it must be understood in its broad sense and not confined to its terminology. Therefore, 'dialogue' must now go to 'social dialogue': "dialogue with the state, dialogue with society - including dialogue with cultures and sciences - and dialogue with other believers who are not part of the Catholic Church" (*Evangelii Gaudium* – EG, no. 238). Continuing this idea, in his latest Encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis once again stresses that dialogue in today's world must be understood in a wider sense. He writes, "Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find

common ground: all these things are summed up in the one word ‘dialogue’” (no. 198).

In the Asian context, when it comes to dialogue, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) also understands dialogue in a very broad sense that "dialogue must take the form of what is called '*dialogue of life*'" (Rosales and Arévalo 1992, 15). This form of “dialogue is a great challenge for the Church in Asia” (Ibid, 89). With that in mind, the FABC has developed the meaning of dialogue in three dimensions: dialogue with people (especially with the poor), dialogue with people of other cultures, and dialogue with people of other religions (Ibid, 14-16). Thus, we can see that, from *Ecclesiam Suam* to the present, many official Church documents have understood ‘dialogue’ as a useful instrument or way of evangelization. In other words, the Church has taken dialogue as the guideline for her pastoral direction.

### 3. From ‘Dialogue’ to ‘Prophetic Dialogue’

Prophetic dialogue is a very special term of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD). The coining of this term is the result of a congregation-wide process of prayer and study to find a new approach to mission work for the congregation in the contemporary milieu. In 2000, the Society of the Divine Word organized its 15th General Chapter, bringing together delegates from different nationalities and cultures across the globe. During the sessions on the missionary orientation of the Chapter, the delegates expressed different opinions. Influenced by the culture of emancipation of the poor, delegates from Latin American countries discussed and proposed a new approach to evangelization that should be prophetic. Meanwhile, delegates from Asia, a continent of the poor with cultural diversity and religious pluralism, suggested a missionary approach that should contain a dialogue dimension. From the above two proposals, the delegates of Chapter arrived at a final decision to reconcile these two approaches. Thus, the accepted theme of the 15th General Chapter of the Congregation came to be *Prophetic Dialogue* (Bevans and Schroeder 2011, 59). After many sessions and much discussion among Chapter delegates, the adjective ‘prophetic’ was added to ‘dialogue’ with the justification that the word ‘dialogue’ alone was not sufficient to express the full meaning of mission, especially mission seen as challenging unjust and sinful situations (Pernia 2016, 26). According to the Chapter document, ‘prophetic dialogue’ is "the deepest and best understanding of the call" of mission. The document

devotes three paragraphs to state what prophetic dialogue means (SVD Generalate 2000, nos. 52-55). We can take the following quotations:

Our discussions in the Chapter have confirmed that our understanding of *ad gentes* mission has shifted from an exclusively geographical orientation to one that includes missionary situations. From our constitutions, the work of recent Chapters, as well as the broader context in which our mission is carried out today, we identify four frontier situations where we hear a special call to respond: primary evangelization and re-evangelization, commitment to the poor and marginalized, cross-cultural witness, and inter-religious understanding.

There are several ways of articulating this specific call to mission. We believe that the deepest and best understanding of this call is expressed in the term ‘Dialogue,’ or more specifically, ‘Prophetic Dialogue.’ Since Vatican II, dialogue with other religions has been promoted widely as one aspect of the Church’s mission (RM, 5). Our specific commitment to this dialogue is reflected in our constitutions (c. 114) and the Statement of the 1988 General Chapter. However, already in the Vatican II documents, the term ‘dialogue,’ in all its richness, is used in a wider meaning to describe our proper attitude toward and relationship with all people. Dialogue is an attitude of “solidarity, respect, and love” (GS, 3) that is to permeate all of our activities. Limited as we are by our personal and cultural viewpoints, none of us has attained the whole truth contained in God and revealed fully in Christ. In dialogue, we search together for this truth.

It is in dialogue that we are able to recognize “the signs of Christ’s presence and the working of the Spirit” (RM, 56) in all people, that we are called to acknowledge our own sinfulness and to engage in constant conversion, that we witness to God’s love by sharing our own convictions boldly and honestly, especially where that love has been obscured by prejudice, violence, and hate. It is clear that we do not dialogue from a neutral position, but out of our own faith. Together with our dialogue partners, we hope to hear the voice of the Spirit of God calling us forward, and in this way our dialogue can be called prophetic. Furthermore, dialogue is not limited to intellectual exchanges. Through the dialogue of life, dialogue of common action

for justice and peace, and the dialogue of religious experience it finds expression in all aspects of our lives. (Ibid, nos. 52-55)

Thus, ‘prophetic dialogue’ means to be a prophet or to play a prophetic role in dialogue as a way or approach for our entire missionary evangelization today. It “is not just a new catchphrase . . . but a sacred commitment shaped by the Spirit” (Pernia, 27). In this study, prophetic dialogue or dialogue will be understood in this manner.

### **Prophetic Dialogue and Pastoral Communication post-COVID-19 Pandemic**

Looking at the reality of Vietnam’s COVID-19 pandemic experience, we realize that the Vietnamese Church is facing many pastoral challenges as it tries to help the people overcome the present crisis. This chapter does not intend to provide a pastoral approach to the entire Vietnamese Church in the post-COVID-19 era; but rather to contribute a simple reflection to help those involved in pastoral work with some suggestions that can be applied to their respective situations. Pope Francis emphatically declares, “If we want to encounter and help one another, we have to dialogue. There is no need for me to stress the benefits of dialogue. I have only to think of what our world would be like without the patient dialogue of the many generous persons who keep families and communities together” (FT, no. 198).

In an act of self-examination, the FABC humbly acknowledged that “the Church often presents objections to evangelization to the poor, lack of concrete involvement in interfaith dialogue and lack of genuine concern for inculturation. In many cases, the Church does not speak prophetically in matters of injustice because of its minority status as a community” (Eilers 2002, 196). Perhaps that is also the situation that the Vietnamese Church is confronting in the post-COVID-19 era. Therefore, according to my observation, the pastoral communication approach in Vietnam for the present context is that of ‘dialogue with reality.’ In other words, there is a need to be ‘concrete’ in terms of circumstances, cultures, and places. The dialogue is one with our concrete reality (situation). In dialogue with concrete reality, we must have the courage to speak with our prophetic voice or play a prophetic role. To this extent, I would like to suggest four approaches or four actions of prophetic dialogue that can be carried out going forward.

## 1. Proclaiming the Presence of God in the World

Amid the COVID-19 crisis, many people ask the question: Is God real or not? In other words, people want to know if God truly present in the world. If God is real, then why does God let the pandemic happen in such a devastating way? Why doesn't God intervene when we come to God for help? Where is God in the midst of this pandemic? These questions, while fundamentally not new, pose many challenges to the contemporary Church vis-à-vis the faith life of the people. For pastoral agents, they are expected to provide answers to the people when these questions are raised in various pastoral encounters. As a pastor in a rural parish in Vietnam, I have met many people, including non-Catholics, all of whom express a range of emotions in recent times: panic, anxiety, fear, anger, sadness, pain, and despair. They cannot hold back these emotions when they are inundated with the dire news and images related to the pandemic day after day. Some had to helplessly watch their siblings writhe in pain, line up for ventilators and eventually die alone. They feel pain when seeing funerals without mourners and corpses lying on the road waiting to be cremated (Tu Anh 2021).

When I witnessed these overwhelming emotions, sometimes I felt like I was being forced to watch a horror movie. I was tempted to get out of this horrifying scene because I did not want to witness painful situations. However, this was not a choice that I could make because I must accompany and empathize with the sufferings of my brothers and sisters. The question is how this could be done. The homily of Pope Francis during the special prayer for the world amid the COVID-19 pandemic at St. Peter's Square on March 27, 2020 serves as an important inspiration for me to think of ways to accompany people who are struggling because of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Pope Francis, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the world is also falling into the same situation as the disciples of Jesus who were floating on the lake at dusk (Mk 4:35-41). When the storm arose, the disciples were afraid and panicked. Jesus still slept in the boat, but the disciples “did not believe that the Lord cared about them.” After they cried out, Jesus helped them through their crisis of faith (Pope Francis 2020). Here, Pope Francis consoles the world:

We are not self-sufficient; by ourselves we flounder; we need the Lord, like ancient navigators needed the stars. Let us invite Jesus into the boats of our lives. Let us hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them. Like the disciples, we will experience that with him on

board there will be no shipwreck. Because this is God's strength: turning to the good everything that happens to us, even the bad things. He brings serenity into our storms, because with God life never dies.

In the current COVID-19 situation as well as after the crisis, as pastors, we need to commit ourselves to proclaim the Gospel with clarity and certainty. The first thing we need to do is, tell people that God is always present with people and the world. He is present with us in every painful event of life. He "always chose to walk with mankind" (Pope Francis 2021). God is present with us to enlighten scientists to quickly find a vaccine to repel the disease. He is present to fuel the enthusiasm of doctors, medical staff, and volunteers so that they can dedicate themselves to serve the victims to overcome the pain and loss caused by the pandemic. He is present to urge leaders to realize their responsibility to take measures to prevent the spread of the disease. He is present to remind people to be more conscious in protecting themselves and the community. Like Jesus on the boat of the disciples in the past, today He is also in the boat of human life to accompany the world. He is present to awaken people's faith in God.

At the same time, we also need to tell everyone that the COVID-19 pandemic is not God's will, nor is it a test that God uses to torment or strengthen our faith (Martin 2020). Rather, God is present with us in the midst of the suffering of the pandemic. "He is in [us], he is with [us] and he never abandons [us]. However far [we] may wander, he is always there, the Risen One. He calls [us] and he waits for [us] to return to him and start over again. When [we] feel [we] are growing old out of sorrow, resentment or fear, doubt, or failure, he will always be there to restore [our] strength and [our] hope" (*Christus Vivit* - CV, no. 2). Thus, in the midst of a world reality full of panic and despair, the disciple of Jesus needs to dialogue with this world reality by raising his/her prophetic voice to help people realize that God is always by our side and enlightens us to find practical ways to resolve the health crisis. That is the Gospel that we need to proclaim first in the present situation.

## **2. Proclaiming the Truth**

In the age of modern mass communication technology, the internet has become an irreplaceable means for social life. As a result, many people have abused the media to draw power to their side by spreading fake information with "their sharp and powerful voices." This is a form of media manipulation

to “seek to tilt public opinion unfairly in their favour. This kind of manipulation can be exercised not only by governments, but also in economics, politics, communications, religion and in other spheres.” They hit those segments of society who do not have the necessary skills to recognize that “the mass media is not always reliable... its content is frequently self-serving and contradictory” (FT, nos. 200-201).

Like many countries around the world, Vietnam during the time of the pandemic was plagued by an infodemic of excessive misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19. People took advantage of the ignorance of many people to exaggerate the danger of the situation. They posted a lot of unsubstantiated breaking news about the pandemic to attract the curiosity of the people, such as providing statistics of infections and deaths that were much higher than that of the official statistics by the Ministry of Health. They propagated disease prevention methods that were not scientifically verified and spread news about the presence of real and fake vaccines in the community. They intentionally sowed confusion, fear, and suspicion by citing false evidence to distort reality. All these actions were detrimental to mutual understanding and “obstructed dialogue” (FT, no. 201).

In such a context, as pastoral agents, what should we do? Pope Francis invites us to recognize that “the heroes of the future [and present] will be those who can break with this unhealthy mindset and determine respectfully to promote truthfulness, aside from personal interest” (FT, no. 202). This means that we must raise our prophetic voice amid a world that has mixed truth and falsehood to help people discern what is true. To carry out this task, Pope Francis instructs us to “start anew from the truth” because “the truth is, in fact, an inseparable companion of justice and mercy.” The truth will help us “pave the way toward a common hope” (FT, nos. 226-227). Thus, in the current situation in Vietnam, pastoral agents must communicate truthfully about the nature of the disease, how it spreads, and how it is transmitted based on scientific facts. Pastoral agents must also forcefully communicate ways that people can protect themselves and others through reasonable and effective measures. As respected individuals in their communities, accurate and objective communication by Church leaders and pastoral agents not only influence people to comply with government and expert instructions but also eliminate excessive anxiety and bewilderment among the people. Thus, when dialoging with the reality – both in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic as well as future issues in post-pandemic Vietnamese society, the disciple of Jesus is

always called to raise the voice of truth in imitation of Jesus who is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (Jn 14: 6).

### 3. Proclaiming Hope

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis urges, “Let us continue, then, to advance along the paths of hope” (no. 55) “despite these dark clouds” (no. 54) caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Pope Francis, we have reason to hope “for God continues to sow abundant seeds of goodness in our human family.” Those “seeds of goodness” are “sustained by ordinary people” “who, in the midst of fear, responded by putting their lives on the line.” They are “doctors, nurses, pharmacists, storekeepers and supermarket workers, cleaning personnel, caretakers, transport workers, men and women working to provide essential services and public safety, volunteers, priests and religious...” (no. 54). Through these people, God shows His loving presence to us.

We must proclaim and encourage people to live hope in the midst of the current pandemic crisis, gazing towards a better future “for hope ‘speaks to us of something deeply rooted in every human heart, independently of our circumstances and historical conditioning. Hope speaks to us of a thirst, an aspiration, a longing for a life of fulfillment, a desire to achieve great things, things that fill our heart and lift our spirit to lofty realities like truth, goodness and beauty, justice and love...’” (FT, no. 55). Jesus asserted, “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6). In other words, God is Truth, Goodness and Beauty, the Word present with us (John 1:14, Mt 1:23). In a situation of crisis, many people have lost all faith and hope in life, there is an urgent need to communicate messages of faith and hope to counter these negative feelings.

Communicating faith and hope does not mean falsely depicting an immediate return to normalcy or a safe place, but rather helping the people to understand and accept the present with hearts and minds looking towards the future. It means helping the faithful to discover the profound meaning of the resurrection mystery. This is by no means a new concept, but the present reality makes this proclamation an absolute necessity. Indeed, only the resurrection hope in the God who is the source and the end of all hope can help people confront all the questions and doubts that arise from the current state of the world. Thus, when dialoging with the reality of Vietnam, facing the COVID-19 pandemic and the short and long-term consequences of this national and global crisis, “we are called to live Faith, Hope and Love, that is, to recognize that God

is almighty, to believe in His love, and give Him a perfect love. Our trust in God assures us: God will heal the world!” (Vu Van Thien 2020).

#### 4. Advocating Justice

At the very beginning of his public ministry, Jesus borrowed the words of the Prophet Isaiah (Is 61:1-3) to declare the option of His ministry (Lk 4:18-19). Jesus affirmed that He was a Prophet of the poor and the lowly in society, making them the first priority of His ministry. So, Jesus exhibited His deepest solidarity with the poor by becoming a poor man (2 Cor 8:9) (Pieris 1988, 15). In the words of Pope Francis, “The poor have a special place in [Jesus]’s heart” (EG, no. 197) because He was born, lived, and died as a poor man. Continuing the mission of Jesus, the Church also affirms that the poor are the object of her missionary ministry. In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), the Second Vatican Council chose “The Church of the Poor” as its central theme. This conviction is strongly affirmed in the following words:

Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and persecution, so the Church is called to follow the same route that it might communicate the fruits of salvation to men. Christ Jesus, “though He was by nature God . . . emptied Himself, taking the nature of a slave”, and “being rich, became poor” for our sakes. Thus, the Church, although it needs human resources to carry out its mission, is not set up to seek earthly glory, but to proclaim, even by its own example, humility and self-sacrifice. Christ was sent by the Father “to bring good news to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart”, “to seek and to save what was lost”. Similarly, the Church encompasses with love all who are afflicted with human suffering and in the poor and afflicted sees the image of its poor and suffering Founder. (LG, no. 8)

In accordance with the Second Vatican Council, the Society of the Divine Word has also recognized that the work for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) constitute one of the four missionary pastoral dimensions considered as ‘characteristic dimensions’ of the Congregation. This outlook is described as a “right relationship with God, with neighbor and with creation” (*Laudato Si’* - LS, no. 240). The Constitution of the SVD lays out the foundation of JPIC, confirming that

The poor have a special place in the Gospel. In a world wounded by injustice and inhumane living conditions, our faith invites us to recognize Christ's presence in the poor and oppressed. Let us then dedicate ourselves to promoting unity and overcoming selfishness and the abuse of power. Let us see it as our responsibility to promote evangelical justice in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed. (SVD Constitution, no. 112)

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, injustice can be seen in all areas of society. The poor and marginalized are unexpectedly the victims of this injustice. Smaller groups who lack power and influence can also be victimized, especially in the digital technology age where just one negative information can turn an individual or a group into victim of social injustice. For instance, when the fourth wave of COVID-19 broke out in Vietnam, especially in the bustling Ho Chi Minh metropolis, a great deal of public anger and blame were aimed towards a small Protestant group who called themselves Giao Hoi Phuc Hung (Renaissance Mission Church) active in the Go Vap District of the city. Many in the Vietnamese public used very strong words to condemn the members of this religious movement because they believed that they were the source of the latest outbreak of the disease in the city. The group even faced government prosecution for causing the spread of the disease in the city (Tien Long and Thao Le 2021).

In the face of such strong sentiments and actions against a small religious group, on May 31, 2021, Joseph Nguyen Nang, the Archbishop of Saigon, issued a “Pastoral Letter” calling on all sections of the People of God to be aware of their responsibility in preventing the spread of the virus. At the same time, the letter also addressed the issue of the Renaissance Mission Church. The archbishop called on the faithful to raise a prophetic voice to defend justice and truth amid the public criticism that were directed at this church, stating:

In the past few days, mouthpieces have been pointing towards members of the Renaissance Mission Church as being responsible for spreading the virus to the people of the city. In fact, these brothers and sisters are just victims of the virus. During the pandemic, we are all involved and responsible. When the spread of the virus is blamed on a religious activity, let us not forget that the category of religion includes us. Therefore, please, Catholic brothers and sisters, always live the spirit of justice and charity, do not use words or have an attitude of

condemnation; on the contrary, let us sympathize, share and pray together and review our own activities. (Joseph Nguyen Nang 2021)

The Renaissance Missionary Church was just one of the countless victims of injustice during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they had to accept injustice in silence because they knew that, in the midst of a society that was full of confusion and troubles, they did not have the opportunity to raise their own voice to defend themselves. In reality, even if they did, it was uncertain whether their voices would achieve any positive results. The situation that they were facing had many questions that could not be readily answered. Who would stand as arbiter to arbitrate right and wrong? Who else would dare stand up to help speak words of justice and truth on their behalf?

Such questions and concerns, in fact, are matters that pastoral agents should take to heart and look for answers. These questions are questions from the poor to pastoral workers who are continually presented with opportunities to raise their prophetic voice. Pope Francis, in his Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, called on everyone to stand up for justice and truth, because only justice and truth can help build a just and fraternal world. This is very urgent for pastoral workers not only in the current situation of the pandemic in Vietnam, but also for many dilemmas facing Vietnamese society in the days and years to come.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken an enormous physical and mental toll on humanity. In the advent of a new decade, the crisis came as a “tragedy” and a “brutal and unforeseen blow” to the whole world (FT, nos. 32-33) with consequences that even now have not all been observed. It has even made many people lose faith and hope in life, and pastoral agents have been presented with unprecedented challenges. Although leaders and experts in various capacities have taken many initiatives to respond to the situation in a timely manner, the “the pain, uncertainty and fear” (FT, no. 33) caused by the pandemic still weighs heavily on the lives of many people. In this chapter, I have proposed the pastoral communication approach of ‘prophetic dialogue with reality’ as a contribution and a response to the ongoing crisis and its aftermath. I believe that this pastoral communication approach is applicable to the present and future situation in Vietnam, for as Pope Francis said, “True wisdom demands an encounter with

reality” (FT, no. 47). This means that ongoing prophetic dialogue is a necessity in order to not avoid or lose “the taste and flavour of the truly real.”

The COVID-19 pandemic is ‘the reality,’ or ‘the signs of the times’ that demands us to ‘encounter’ and ‘dialogue’ with it. Indeed, “we can [only] seek the truth in dialogue, in relaxed conversation or in passionate debate.” In this manner, prophetic dialogue is not only useful for the present pastoral context but also for the future with its many uncertainties and promises. Prophetic dialogue as a pastoral communication approach, however, is a complex topic and requires a lot of time and cooperation of many people. Nonetheless, I believe that in the face of many urgent issues facing contemporary Vietnamese society, well-intentioned people, especially pastoral agents, would do well to explore in more details principles and approaches for effective and meaningful prophetic dialogue in order to address the current milieu.

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# The Pastoral Methodology and Prospect of Korean Catholic Church in the post- COVID-19 Era: Centering on the Integrated On-Offline Pastoral Ministry

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## Introduction

In early 2020, humanity began experiencing a devastating situation called a pandemic. Although the spread of infectious diseases has swept the continent several times in human history, it is unprecedented to have spread simultaneously on a global level across continents, regions, and countries like this time. In Korea, the level and degree of coronavirus infection (COVID-19) began escalating in February 2020 and re-proliferating nationwide.

In the face of an unprecedented crisis, we have experienced changes unlike before in all areas of life – politics, economy, society, and culture – all undergoing appropriate responses and adaptation processes through numerous trials and errors. It is called a 'new normal'<sup>1</sup> for us. When the pandemic arrived, to comply with the quarantine rule of social distancing, the social system and daily life were switched from 'face-to-face' to 'non-face-to-face,' with the tendency of increasing non-face-to-face online communication such as working from home, home classes, and video conferences. It was an entry into a so-

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<sup>1</sup> 'New normal' refers to a state in which old standards no longer work and new values lead the world change according to the changes of the times. In fact, this phenomenon is a cultural phenomenon that has already emerged as the fourth industrial revolution such as AI, big data, and robots progresses, as well as deepening individualistic society and the rapid increase of single-person households and is rapidly becoming common in everyday life and society due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

called 'non-face-to-face society' or 'un-tact society.'<sup>2</sup> Of course, as our society gradually becomes more individualistic and online-communicative, the 'routinization of non-face-to-face' has been predicted to some extent. It is now obvious that COVID-19 will cause the online culture to spread to all areas of society quickly and widely.

Online culture is being more prominent and developed even in the religious field, compared to the time before COVID-19. Korean religions, including Catholicism, face the task of creatively adapting to a new environment, breaking the traditional way of worship and practice of faith, especially in the pandemic era when even the most basic ecclesial activities are either banned or only partly allowed.

The priority pastoral response of the Church to the pandemic was initiating 'online pastoral ministry.'<sup>3</sup> Online pastoral ministry became the only means for connection and fellowship between institutional churches, believers, and members of the community in a bleak situation where opportunities for direct encounters, fellowships, and sacred spaces were blocked in performing church activities and religious life. In fact, during the period when the Mass was suspended for more than two months, Church authorities and believers tried to satisfy their thirst for faith and spirituality by connecting and sharing with each other through various social media platforms as well as broadcasting the Mass on television.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 'Un-tact' is an abbreviation of un-contact. In this article, I will use non-face-to-face and un-tact interchangeably, but mainly choosing non-face-to-face.

<sup>3</sup> The term of online pastoral is a superordinate concept to digital religion. Digital religion is divided into 'religion online' and 'online religion'. 'Religion Online' serves as a tool for the extension of the existing offline Church by providing religious information and various services. Websites and various portal sites are its examples. On the other hand, 'online religion' leads Internet visitors to participate in religious practices such as prayer, meditation, ceremonies, and spiritual counseling. For example, 'cyber-Church' plays this role. The two are often mixed together rather than different distinctly. The 'online pastoral ministry' to be explained here is a sub-concept of 'online religion'. In recent years, as smartphones become commonplace, online pastoral services through various SNS, and applications are diversifying and continuing to evolve. (ref.: Helland, Christopher (2001). 'Online Religion/Religion Online and Virtual Communitas,' In Cowan, Douglas E.; Hadden, Jeffrey K. (eds.). Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises. Emerald Group Publishing Limited. pp. 205–224.

<sup>4</sup> The Catholic Peace Broadcasting 'TV Daily Mass' increased its audience rating by nearly ten times, and the online Masses produced by each diocese and parish in the country also received great attention. Broadcasting Mass played a big part in offering as a substitute in the situation where they could not go to Mass. (ref:

[http://www.cpbcc.co.kr/CMS/news/view\\_body.php?cid=778037&path=202004](http://www.cpbcc.co.kr/CMS/news/view_body.php?cid=778037&path=202004))

However, there was a big dilemma here. Church activities and practices of faith require direct encounters and communication in the physical space. The practice of faith through online communication does not essentially guarantee a complete faith life. Meanwhile, in a situation where the spread of infectious diseases was severe, online faith practice was bound to be the only alternative. Therefore, it was natural and logical that the Catholic pastoral countermeasures in the pandemic era should introduce the existing offline pastoral ministry into the online sphere.

Online pastoral ministry had been actively used as a subsidiary means of pastoral ministries in churches even before the pandemic due to the routinization of digital culture. This is consistent with teachings of the Church regarding the use of media in various documents that it is the duty of churches and believers to view digital media as ‘a gift from God’ and to use it as a useful means of evangelization.<sup>5</sup> However, in a situation where the pandemic forced the suspension of Mass and small group gatherings, online pastoral ministry had a different meaning and importance than in the past. It was no longer just a subsidiary or simple aid to existing pastoral ministries. While not undermining the necessity and importance of direct encounters and communion, it revealed its position as a new means of evangelization that contributed decisively to the communion and unity of the people of God through a high degree of efficiency and convenience that offline pastoral ministries could not reach.

This chapter focuses on the meaning and role of online pastoral ministry, which was inevitably emphasized in the pandemic era, and tries to explore the methodology and prospect of how the Church should achieve the integration of online and offline pastoral ministry during and post-pandemic. First, it looks at the reality of non-face-to-face communication in Korean society and its characteristics. Second, it discusses the necessity and importance of online pastoral ministry in disaster situations on the basis of three statistical surveys<sup>6</sup> conducted within the Korean Church during the first year of the pandemic. Third, it introduces the current status of online pastoral ministry in the Korean Church with particular reference to the COVID-19 situation and points out its

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Communio et Progressio’ (article 2); ‘Aetatis Novae’ (article 22); ‘Internet and Church’ (article 1)

<sup>6</sup> The result of a survey for ‘Practicing Faith in the Pandemic Era’ conducted by Woori Theology Institute on May 10-20, 2020; the result of a ‘COVID-19 Believers Consciousness Survey’ conducted by Uijeongbu Diocese on May 20-27, and the result of a survey for ‘COVID-19 and Religious Life’ conducted by the Pastoral Bureau of the Seoul Archdiocese on July 17-26.

limitations. Finally, it argues for the possibility of integrating online pastoral ministry with that carried out offline.

### **The Phenomenon of Non-Face-to-Face Culture Increasing with COVID-19 and Its Characteristics**

The ‘non-face-to-face culture’ is spreading around the world as one of the alternatives to solve the disconnection problem while causing and prolonging social disconnection due to the quarantine rule of social distancing. Since the era before COVID-19, a culture of non-face-to-face communication has emerged that meets the needs of generations who are familiar with online infrastructure by choosing ‘selective disconnection’ instead of ‘inconvenient communication.’ However, the phenomenon of non-face-to-face culture, which allows convenient communication while protecting from the risk of coronavirus infection, is changing the paradigm of social structure. For example, there is an acceleration of many non-face-to-face phenomena, such as working from home, online classes, video conferencing, non-face-to-face performance, non-face-to-face worship or online Mass, online shopping, and telemedicine. Even after the COVID-19 pandemic has passed, non-face-to-face industries and cultures will continue to take root and expand with the development of the 4th Industrial Revolution.

Non-face-to-face culture is characterized by immediacy, convenience, and untact-ness.<sup>7</sup> It allows easy and convenient access anytime, anywhere, and communicates with instant feedback without physically contacting anyone. Online shopping and non-face-to-face financing are common, and non-face-to-face online classes initially had to undergo a lot of trial and error, but now are adapting well enough to have systematic feedbacks between teachers and students. Online performances and concerts through the non-face-to-face method allow numerous people to participate beyond time and space. Online memorial services and grave services are also being used. People decorate the surroundings of the portrait of the deceased and celebrate the life of the deceased through non-face-to-face remembrance. Despite the advantages of this non-face-to-face culture, its disadvantages cannot be ignored.

The non-face-to-face culture has the advantage of continuing multiple relationships by connecting disconnected relationships through online communication while practicing social distancing, but at the same time it causes

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Untact-ness’ is a neologism circulating in Korea, which means noncontact.

various structural and everyday problems. First, due to COVID-19, the situation in which each person is trapped in his/her own digital grid is strengthening as much as the physical isolation of reality derived to excessive immersion in virtual space or online communication created by digital devices. People try to communicate more through social media than usual, or are more exposed to online games, gambling, and pornography. This is a situation where online access is increasing due to increased depression and anxiety related to ‘corona blues’<sup>8</sup> and poor sleep.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the more someone is closed in the digital space, the more the phenomenon of escape from reality increases.

Second, the non-face-to-face culture amplifies indifference or hatred toward those who are suffering. A representative example is the malicious comments seen online. Countless people have become victims of malicious comments such as slander, gossip, and fake news about the other people’s posts. Another case involves couriers who work for fast delivery services. The sweat and tears of the courier drivers who have to risk their lives every day due to overwork are behind the convenience of courier services that are easy to avail online. In 2020, there were at least seven delivery drivers in Korea who died due to overwork.<sup>10</sup>

Third, non-face-to-face culture is creating waste that pollutes the environment. With the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic, recyclable waste such as wrapping paper, disposable cups, vinyl, and plastics have been increasing. In fact, due to the disaster brought about by the climate change crisis, the spread of the deadly virus and global warming, which is driven by ecological destruction caused by environmental pollution and overconsumption, the earth is gradually reaching its end of life. As the groaning earth is filled of various kinds of garbage, its lifespan is expected to become shorter.

As one of the alternatives to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic, the non-face-to-face culture is accelerating further. However, it is necessary to recognize its strengths and weaknesses. All social fields are universally accepting non-face-to-face culture in a variety of ways. In particular, the religious world is making efforts to continue religious life by introducing non-face-to-face worship, Mass, and various cultural contents without exception. However, it can be difficult to realize a true religion without considering the positive and negative sides of a non-face-to-face culture. Now, I would like to look at the existing statistical surveys to find out the level of necessity and importance the online pastoral

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<sup>8</sup> Corona blues is a Korean neologism which refers to depression caused by the coronavirus. It contains elements of depression, tiredness, hopelessness, and a sense that work is unpleasant but unavoidable, becoming a cultural phenomenon.

<sup>9</sup> Ref. <http://www.docdocdoc.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=2000492>

<sup>10</sup> Ref. <http://www.catholicnews.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=22987>

ministry that the Catholic Church has been implementing in the coronavirus era for the faith life of Korean Catholics.

## **The Role of Catholic Online Pastoral Ministry in the Coronavirus Situation**

### **1. The Spread of COVID-19 in Korea and the Response of the Catholic Church**

The nationwide spread of COVID-19, which started in February 2020, has had a tremendous impact on all areas of our society, including the religious world. For the first time in the 236-year history of the Korean Catholic Church, community Masses were stopped in all dioceses across the country. Catholic liturgy and sacramental life, which previously were never stopped despite severe persecution, ceased completely. The Catholic Church's religious life, which was led by the liturgy and the sacraments, was in an unprecedented crisis situation.

From the start of COVID-19 until Easter 2020, Masses were stopped, and churches were closed. With strict quarantine measures, many faithful filled their spiritual thirst by watching the Catholic Peace Broadcast Mass on cable TV and YouTube, or watching parish online Masses also through YouTube. Fortunately, in April 2020, the spread of COVID-19 slowed allowing Masses to resume, and from June, church gatherings became possible on the condition of strict quarantine compliance. However, in mid-August, the number of confirmed infections increased due to gatherings among some Protestant churches including Sarangjeil Church in Seoul and the conservatives' rally, causing the virus to re-spread nationwide. Government authorities raised the degree of social distancing to the second stage (the 2.5 stage has been practiced in Seoul) from mid-August to the time this chapter is being written, prohibiting all group gatherings except for regular Masses. The authorities allowed regular Masses and Buddhist ceremonies but issued an executive order to switch to non-face-to-face worship for Protestants groups which have caused frequent group infections. Some Protestants groups insisted on face-to-face worship, claiming that banning worship constituted religious repression that violated religious freedom.

At the time of the spread and re-proliferation of the coronavirus, the Catholic Church made various creative alternatives by paying attention to the online pastoral ministry that previously served as a supplement to the offline

pastoral ministry, as all church activities such as Mass rituals, group meetings, catechesis, etc., which had been held in the church space, became impossible. In the early days of the coronavirus outbreak, when Masses were suspended and churches closed, a representative online pastoral ministry was the video Masses produced and broadcast by Catholic Peace Broadcasting TV and its YouTube channel. This was watched nationwide by the congregation, in the place of the face-to-face Sunday Mass. Some parish priests directly produced and uploaded the videos of Masses for their members. Also, some other parish priests regularly shared lectures, reflections, or parish news through social media. During this period, the Church had no choice but to rely entirely on a non-face-to-face modality so that the relationship with the faithful could not be cut off and the basic religious life could be continued.

More recently, church activities such as face-to-face Masses, group meetings, and catechesis under the condition of strict adherence to social distancing rules have been extremely limited. Nevertheless, it is very positive that existing pastoral ministries which was difficult to practice has evolved into a desirable phenomenon that introduces and resolves some practical methods by utilizing online pastoral ministry. New and diverse forms of online pastoral ministries emerged as follows: small group meetings and Legion of Mary meetings using KakaoTalk single chat rooms, YouTube catechesis education, Bible study or reading meetings using video conferencing platforms, and children's First Communion classes that incorporate live Internet broadcasting and face-to-face sessions. In order for the Church to continue without stopping its pastoral and missionary activities and practices under any circumstances, it is necessary to recognize the possibility of online pastoral ministry and try to further develop it. Next, I would like to look at the analysis and evaluation of the online pastoral ministries that were conducted at that time, using as a first research data for this chapter with the statistical survey results already announced by various church organizations on online pastoral ministries that the Church initiated in the early part of COVID-19 pandemic.

## **2. Analysis and Evaluation of Online Pastoral Care in the Early Days of COVID-19**

- 1) The survey result of the Woori Theology Institute<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Woori Theology Institute, "Report on the Results of a Survey on Faith Practices in the Pandemic Era," Wooshinyeon, September 15, 2020. From now on, Woori theology institute will be shortened to 'Wooshinyeon'.

First, the Woori Theological Institute (Wooshinyeon) conducted an online national survey on May 10-20, 2020 with the respondents broken down as follows: 6074 people, 134 priests, and 438 religious. According to the survey results, while community Masses were suspended, the viewing of ‘Catholic Peace Broadcasting Relay Mass’ was the most common (43.3% of the respondents). Other programs accessed by the respondents included: ‘online Mass on platforms such as YouTube run by dioceses or parishes’ (16.4%), ‘The Rosary’s prayer’ (12.5%), and ‘Sunday Mass Reading and Gospel reading’ (10.3%). By age, those who were higher in age and more active in the parish, tended to watch the ‘Catholic Peace Broadcasting Mass’ more. The proportion of lay people who responded that they did not attend the service was 10.5%. The younger people and those who were often absent or did not go to church tended to have a higher the rate of viewing. Among the changes in daily life after COVID-19, ‘Internet and smartphone use including SNS (social networking services) increased’ was the highest at 63.4%. Among the answers to questions about the change in faith life, 75.1% of the respondents revealed that they accessed a lot of faith-related online contents platforms such as SNS and YouTube. 53.2% of the respondents said they frequently contacted the church members by phone, text message, or social media. 79.7% of the respondents who were the clergy and religious believed that ‘new pastoral attempts and gatherings in a non-face-to-face manner will increase.’ Regarding the question of predicting the change of daily faith life, the result of this survey clearly indicates that eventually the status of online pastoral ministry in the Church will gain greater importance.

## 2) The Survey Results of Uijeongbu Diocese<sup>12</sup>

The ‘COVID-19 Believers Consciousness Survey,’ conducted online on May 20-27, 2020, was responded by 6,000 parishioners of Uijeongbu Diocese. According to this survey, among ‘the changes in daily life due to COVID-19,’ ‘the increase of internet and smartphones use’ was the highest with 84.2%, ‘Catholic Peace Broadcasting Mass’ was 34%, and then ‘diocese and parish YouTube Mass participation’ was 19.5%. Among the questions related to the changes in faith life during the cessation of Mass, 65.9% of the respondents reported ‘the use of faith-related contents through online media,’ while 65.8%

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<sup>12</sup> Ref. The Laity Apostles Council of Catholic Diocese of Uijeongbu in Korea, “The Church Preparing for the Post-Covid-19: The Report on the Believers Survey Results of the Uijeongbu Diocese,” the same council, July 5, 2020.

listed ‘the experience in frequently contacting church members with social media.’ 58.7% of respondents also predicted that ‘non-face-to-face online meetings would be activated.’ In addition, among the topics that Korean Catholics suffering from coronavirus should be more interested, there was a significant response that the development of various online contents amounted to 27.2%.

### 3) The Survey Results of Seoul Archdiocese<sup>13</sup>

The Pastoral Bureau of Seoul Archdiocese conducted a survey on ‘COVID-19 and the life of faith’ on July 17-26, 2020. The survey, which was responded by 21,439 people, was also conducted online. The results indicated that 81.9% answered positively ‘that they have been using a lot of faith-related contents through SNS, YouTube, and Catholic Peace Broadcast TV/RADIO.’ It was found that most of the faithful had been sustaining their religious life through various types of media during the difficult time for face-to-face activities due to COVID-19. The results of surveys are represented in figures below.

Figure 1: The use rate of online faith-related contents

Estimation	Rate	Respondents (No.)
1	6.7%	1,442
2	11.4%	2,443
3	19.9%	4,272
4	21.9%	4,685
5	40.1%	8,597

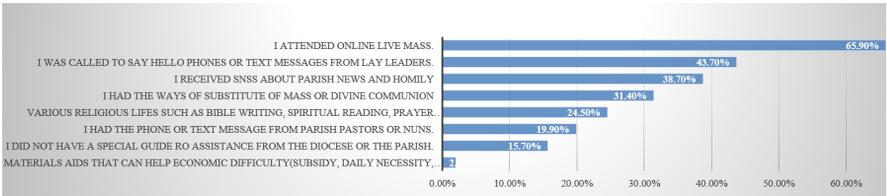
In terms of the assistance received from dioceses and parishes when Masses were suspended, the online live streamed Mass was the most indicated at 65.9%. The respondents answered that they were able to participate in online Mass through various media such as Catholic Peace Broadcasting and the Internet. Another form of assistance was receiving phone calls and text messages (43.7%)

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<sup>13</sup> Ref. The Planning and Research Team of the Seoul Archdiocese Pastoral Bureau, ‘the Report on the Results of an Emergency Survey on “COVID-19 and the Life of Faith” for Believers to Prepare an Alternative Pastoral Care in the Seoul Archdiocese,’ August 10, 2020.

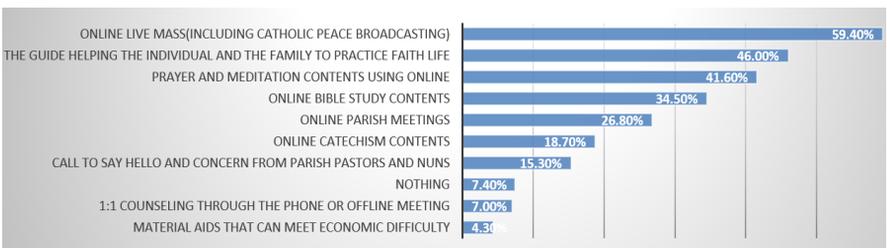
from the district heads, group heads, and pastoral committees, followed by parish news and homilies (38.7%). At the time of the cessation of Masses, the top three forms of assistance received from the diocese and parish were all related to online pastoral care. Figure 2 below shows the results discussed.

Figure 2: Assistance from the diocese and the parish when the Mass was suspended



When asked what kind of assistance they would like to receive from the diocese or the parish in a possible pandemic situation, 59.4% (12,730 people) of the respondents wanted to participate in online Mass through Catholic Peace Broadcasting or YouTube. 41.6% (8,923 people) wanted ‘online prayer and meditation content.’ At the same time, 84.4% (18,089 people) agreed on the need for an online religious education program at the parish level (an online education system for learning the Bible and Church teachings using the Internet). A high number of respondents, 70.9% (15,200 people), expressed that they were willing to participate actively in such a program. They also wanted an online parish community meeting (26.8%). In general, many Korean Catholics approved the strengthening of online channels as one of the main measures to overcome the difficulties to faith life caused by the COVID-19 crisis. Figure3 indicates the forms of assistance that are expected from the parish and the diocese in the next pandemic.

Figure3: Assistance expected from the parish and the diocese in the next pandemic



4) The Overall Evaluation of the Three Surveys

The three online surveys conducted by the Korean church during the early stage of the pandemic reveal that online pastoral ministry has had a significant impact on religious life, and it can be understood that the spiritual support that the faithful request from the diocese or the parish primarily concern online contents. First, the very significant and common responses of respondents in the three surveys point out that even though Mass was temporarily suspended due to COVID-19, they were sustaining their spiritual life through religious contents on television or online channels. The following chart supports this assessment.

Figure 4: Online Mass participation rate shown in three survey organizations

	Wooshinyeon	Uijeongbu Diocese	Seoul Archdiocese
TV relay Mass	43.2%	34%	65.9%
Online Mass of diocese and parish	16.4%	19.5%	

(There is no difference between TV relay Mass and online Mass in Seoul Archdiocese)

The faithful must have had a great thirst for spiritual support due to inability to offer the Eucharist when Masses were suspended during COVID-19 lockdowns. Figure 4 above clearly demonstrates that there was an attempt to overcome this thirst through broadcast or online Mass. Therefore, in the future, TV Mass and online Mass will play a significant role in allowing believers to access the Eucharist at any time and maintain their religious life.

Second, another common point in the results of the three surveys is that believers who are very religious, frequently accessed online faith-related contents during the cessation of Masses.

Figure 5: Experience of using online faith-related contents

Wooshinyeon	Uijeongbu Diocese	Seoul Archdiocese
75.1%	65.9%	81.9%

In connection with Table 5 above, it can be seen from the common results of the three surveys that believers frequently contacted and communicated with other church members by phone, text message, and social media.

Figure 6: Experience of contacting church members and checking their regards by using digital means

Wooshinyeon	Uijeongbu Diocese	Seoul Archdiocese
53.2%	65.8%	82.4%

Lastly, from the results of the three surveys, in terms of support from the diocese and the parish in a future pandemic, or it can be seen that online pastoral ministry occupies a considerable position. In the results of the survey of the Seoul Archdiocese, the top five responses to the question about assistance from the diocese and the parish in a future pandemic are all related to online support, including online Mass, online prayer and meditation contents, online faith programs, online parish community meetings, and so on. These responses serve as an indicator of how big the role of online pastoral ministry will be in the future.

The results of the survey carried out by Uijeongbu Diocese suggest that online meetings will be activated in the future in a pandemic situation. In addition, the survey results of Woori Theology Institute present the following answer to the questions that predict changes in daily religious life, only for priests and religious people as its respondents. 79.7 per cent of the respondents said that the number of new pastoral attempts and gatherings applied for non-face-to-face ways would increase much more. Not only ordinary believers, but also priests and religious affirmed that online pastoral ministry will grow.

The dedication and efforts of church authorities and the faithful who tried to maintain a continuous life of faith through a non-face-to-face online culture in the unprecedented situation of the cessation of the Mass and the closure of the church due to the coronavirus outbreak is revealed through the results of

the three surveys discussed above. In addition, it is estimated that the role of online pastoral ministry will further spread and evolve in the future.

## **Current Status, Examples, and Limitations of Online Pastoral Ministry in the Era of COVID-19**

### **1. The Current Status of Online Pastoral Ministry**

The formation and development process of online pastoral ministry within the Church is in line with the development of Korea's information and communication technology (ICT) industry. Production and distribution of digital electronic products such as computers, tablet PCs, notebooks, and smartphones are led by Samsung and LG globally. In Korea, there is 100 percent Internet penetration and 95 percent use of smartphones. The globalization of the Korean Wave led by idol groups such as BTS, Director Bong Joon-ho's film 'Parasite' (2019), which won the different World Film Festival Awards, and so on, have been carried out as a background that brought Korea's status to the global ranks. This has been achieved by means of the development beyond imagination of the digital culture industry as well as the creative use and spread of this culture.

The Church has also created a new church culture by accepting and indigenizing the popularized and routinized digital culture. In the beginning, the Internet had an influence on Church institutions, organizations, and individuals. But recently, with the advent of smartphones and SNSs, various online pastoral ministries are actively being initiated, including Catholic Good News ([www.catholic.or.kr](http://www.catholic.or.kr)), which is a portal site provided by the Seoul Archdiocese, different Catholic applications, Catholic Peace Broadcasting and Newspaper. In this regard, all dioceses, monasteries, parishes and groups, and individuals are very active in using online communication. There has been a tremendous acceleration in online pastoral practices such as online catechism for the catechumens, confirmation, and marriage, e-learning Bible study, Bible transcription and continuous use, and faith-related YouTube channels run by organizations and individuals. Cultural and spiritual contents related to Catholicism have increased significantly as well. The list of imaginative contents include: 'New Materials,' video contents produced by young priests (interesting faith contents introduced by the priests), 'The Sister and the Brother Reading Books Sister' podcast, 'Fr. Hong Seongnam's Stinging Spiritual Psychology',

'Saint Philippe Ecology Village' by Father Hwang Chang-yeon of Suwon Diocese, YouTube channel of Church's Brothers', and Instagram accounts of 'Church's Sisters,' and so on.

The coronavirus outbreak brought more attention to the online pastoral ministry that has already been growing in the Church. The online communication continued even during the period when Masses were halted. The TV broadcast Mass and YouTube channel were the most active platforms for communication. In addition to the official channels of each diocese, many enthusiastic pastors, religious congregations, and enthusiastic laypeople who were proficient in digital communication, began to communicate online in various forms. Now, I would like to introduce some representative examples.

## **2. The Example of Online Pastoral Ministry**

First, it is remarkable that the viewing rate of Catholic Peace Broadcasting TV's weekday Mass increased three to five times from the usual numbers, and that the viewership of the Sunday broadcast of the Mass increased ten times during the lockdown. In addition, enthusiastic parish pastors provided their online Mass through YouTube channels. This reflects their thoughtful consideration of the need of their parishioners who preferred to see familiar parish settings.

The second example of online pastoral ministry is about an online communication led by some parish pastors who regularly sent their homilies, meditations, or announcements through SNS or text messages. These pastors also sent their regards and support to sustain the religious life of individuals and groups of believers. Although this kind of communication had always been made, there was a greater reliance on online communication as an alternative to overcome the social disconnection caused by COVID-19 and the resulting thirst for connection and communication.

The third case of online pastoral ministry was the use of various online meeting platforms so that the activities of parish groups could be continued in a situation in which all in-person group meetings were suspended. It may be difficult for the group meeting to return as before even if it becomes possible later. So, even in situations where everything is suspended, online meetings should be able to continue. For example, I encouraged the leaders in my parish to carry out the Basic Christian Community and Legion of Mary meetings online. As a result, online meetings continued to take place using the KakaoTalk chat room to send and receive texts according to the given time and order. In

addition, the parish pastoral council and Bible study meetings were held regularly using the video conferencing platform Zoom.

Fourth, online pastoral ministry was active in Sunday school education. There were difficulties in implementing children and youth religious education because of suspension of youth Masses. As an alternative to Sunday school education, which had been mainly delivered through face-to-face activities, an online catechesis program was devised through messenger and SNS such as YouTube and KakaoTalk. For example, a teacher created a video about a particular Church teaching, uploaded it to YouTube, and sent the link to the parents. Thus, the parents were able to watch the YouTube video at home with their children. Online pastoral ministry, which used to be a secondary means in youth pastoral ministry, came the forefront for youth work during the COVID-19 crisis. As another example, in one parish, the prenatal education sessions were turned into non-face-to-face with the help of YouTube video.<sup>14</sup> The materials used in the program were mailed to the participants so they could use at home. Furthermore, it played a role in relieving through faith the anxiety brought about by the coronavirus pandemic that pregnant women may have experienced.

### **3. The Limitation of Online Pastoral Ministry**

There were several difficulties in the process of reproducing the offline-oriented church activities online. In the face of the coronavirus pandemic, more online pastoral ministry was requested. However, without considering the accompanying problems, it will not be able to go in a desirable direction. First, among Church leaders and pastors, there was a negative impression of digital culture, broadly of media culture, or a tendency to narrowly perceive it as a tool or means. The pastors with these negative perceptions hesitated to accept online pastoral ministries in their pastoral field. The duality of the benefits and harms of digital culture must be considered. Therefore, if digital culture is regarded only as a means or tool, active online pastoral ministry cannot be achieved. Second, there was a lack of understanding or skill in dealing with digital media. Young priests easily accepted and utilized online pastoral initiatives, but it could be difficult for middle-aged priests. Digital media curriculum is necessary for seminary education. Third, among believers, there was a possibility that they would only rely on online Masses and online meetings. Online Mass was a limited temporary measure when physical participation was impossible for the

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<sup>14</sup> Ref., [https://www.catholictimes.org/article/article\\_view.php?aid=346311](https://www.catholictimes.org/article/article_view.php?aid=346311)

sick, pregnant women, the elderly, or because of disasters. However, if the Mass resumes and people can go to church for in-person participation, there should no longer be a reliance on online Mass.<sup>15</sup> Also, if the parish Basic Christian Community, the Legion of Mary, or other parish groups depend only on non-face-to-face online platforms for convenience, it will be difficult to share and communicate with others. The Church is a community. The Church community is not an online virtual community, but a place where people physically meet, share fellowship, and build solidarity.

### **The Preferred Pastoral Ministry: An On-Offline Integrated Model**

As the digital cultural environment is rapidly changing, the area that online pastoral ministries occupy in the whole of church activities and religious life is expanding. In particular, in the era of COVID-19, the Church, which was previously dominated by offline pastoral ministries is moving toward an inseparable relationship with online pastoral ministries. However, online pastoral ministries have several limitations already mentioned above. A possible alternative that can overcome or supplement these limitations is an ‘integration of online and offline pastoral program.’ It is necessary to recognize the physical characteristics of the liturgy and sacraments celebrated offline, which should be combined with the online form. In the same context, Father Song Yong-min, a professor at the Catholic University of Incheon, emphasizes as follows:

There is also a discourse that the Church could be moved to an online church or to a virtual reality church in the future with the 4th Industrial Revolution. However, this may be the self-rescue of the Church facing the pandemic, but the face-to-face culture, the essence of the sacrament, should not be reduced to non-essential elements... It is necessary to balance the non-face-to-face pastoral method and the face-to-face method.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ref., <https://philippines.licas.news/2020/09/13/online-mass-not-a-substitute-to-physical-attendance-in-liturgy-warns-vatican-official/>

<sup>16</sup> Catholic Journalists Association of Korea, ‘New Normal after COVID-19 - Korean Society and Religion: Religion to Face-to-Face, How to Change and Renew in the Non-face-to-Face Era’, The 20th Catholic Forum, Korea Press Foundation Media Education Center, September 2, 2020.

As Father Song Yong-min suggested that the harmony between non-face-to-face and face-to-face ministry is requested, the harmony and integration of online and offline pastoral ministry would be the most desirable method. However, whether online or offline pastoral ministry can be effective depends on each particular situation. For example, the seven sacraments are realized through direct meetings and communication in the pastoral field.

Here are some examples of how to integrate online and offline. The First Communion catechism program was conducted online through live Internet lectures with minimal face-to-face education. However, the First Communion rite was celebrated at the parish after the completion of the classes. The offline participation took place in a holy physical space called the parish, strictly following the quarantine rules. In the event that most parishes could not carry out the catechism for the first communicant this year and postponed it to next year, the above case suggests the possibility of sacramental celebration even in the era of COVID-19. Another example is conducting group meetings using both online and offline means. Of course, in the first stage of social distancing where small group meetings are possible, in order to end face-to-face meetings in shorter time than usual, it is enough to deliver the pastor's remarks or announcements to the members through KakaoTalk or text message in an earlier time. The reason is due to the need to minimize time as required during a quarantine. Flexibility is necessary to deal with each particular situation, which means sometimes doing activities online, sometimes offline, and sometimes by combining the two formats. In the future, I look forward to the development of creative faith contents based on the integrated model of online and offline pastoral ministry.

## Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic, which has put humanity at risk, has been changing many things. The Church entrusted with the mission of evangelization is also at the crossroads of change under tremendous influences. One of the changes is the reinforcement of the online pastoral ministry that enables connection and communication to maintain church activities and religious life while complying with the quarantine rules of social distancing. By analyzing and evaluating the results of the three surveys carried out during the early stage of the pandemic, we can clearly recognize that online pastoral ministries played a significant role in a crisis such as COVID-19. Furthermore, they confirm that

online ministry will continue to be necessary to support faith life in the future. However, while increasing the quantity of online pastoral ministry in the Church can have important meaning, in the long term, it is necessary to give new and strengthened meaning to online pastoral ministry in theological and ecclesial dimensions. In other words, online pastoral ministry has remained at an auxiliary level of pastoral aid until now, but there would be a possibility that it will have a stronger meaning in the future if special situations where access to sacred spaces and liturgies is physically restricted are frequent. Although the necessity and importance of online pastoral ministry becomes more prominent, we cannot help but recognize its limitations.

In the report of the Uijeongbu Diocese survey, the following advice on online pastoral ministry to its parishioners during the early period of the coronavirus outbreak is noteworthy:

In the non-face-to-face pastoral approach, we must not forget that ‘the warmth of evangelical values and love’ must be conveyed. It should be a pastoral method in which the ‘hospitality,’ which has been pointed out as the lack of the Catholic Church, is well conveyed. To express that it should respond in the ‘Gospel way’ is not simply to follow the trend of tools or content methods, but to emphasize that the Church must have its own color and warmth... Also, the Church must prepare pastoral alternatives for those who are not accustomed to using non-face-to-face tools.<sup>17</sup>

It is imperative that the non-face-to-face online pastoral work must go beyond simple tools and then be settled down as a new church culture. This refers to the necessity of a ‘DIGILOG approach’ in which digital and analog are combined, and to the accompanying research that must be conducted on the proper method of online pastoral ministry.

Now COVID-19 has opened up a new era that humanity has not previously experienced, and we must accept the possibility of coexistence with the coronavirus. Jesus says, “New wine must be poured into fresh wineskins” (Lk 5:38). In order for new evangelization to be realized in the era of COVID-19 and beyond, an online pastoral ministry called ‘fresh wineskins’ is required. Pope St. John Paul II, during his visit to South America in 1983, announced the ‘New Evangelization,’ presenting its three characteristics composed of ‘new passion,’

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<sup>17</sup> Id., Uijeongbu Diocese Survey Results Report, Jaehwa Lee, ‘Directions and Tasks for the Pastoral Response of Uijeongbu Diocese,’ 47.

‘new way,’ and ‘new expression.’ If the current Church applies them to online pastoral ministry to realize the new evangelization, the present challenge can become an opportunity. With deeper pastoral reflections about the integrated pastoral ministry of online and offline, I believe that we can find ways to cope with the changed situation of the modern world without damaging the identity of Christianity and the essence of evangelization.

# **‘*Tengan*’ Observance: Implications of the Kankanaeys’ COVID-19 Response for the New Normal**

*Brandon Billan Cadingpal*

## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about different challenges in this world. It has affected the daily lives of people and aggravated sicknesses that lead to the death of many (Haleem et al 2020, 78). The most common responses to the pandemic have included one or a combination of lockdowns, curfews, and the closing of ‘nonessential’ businesses (Choutagunta et al 2021, 1267-1299). Various regions of the world have adopted responses in their unique ways. In South America, for example, pressure on the healthcare system and fiscal expenditure on health, regional and local government capacity resulted in faster response to lower the number of cases of infection, especially during the earlier stages of the COVID-19 surge in the region (González-Bustamante 2021). Particularly in the Philippines, lockdowns and border controls were also implemented. Appropriate policy responses helped in mitigating the effects of the lockdown and in the recovery process of the country. Interestingly, aside from the usual government and other wide-scale responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, some indigenous peoples in the Philippines also took the initiative to resort to their traditional values and practices to deal with the stressful and chaotic situation. Among the Kankanaeys in the Cordillera Administrative Region in the Northern Philippines, the traditional practice of ‘*Tengan*’ enabled the indigenous population to adapt effectively to the COVID-19 crisis.

### The Traditional/pre-Pandemic Kankanaey ‘*Tengan*’ Practice

The Kankanaeys are major ethnolinguistic indigenous peoples in the Cordillera Administrative Region of the Philippines, specifically Western Mountain Province, Benguet Province, and Baguio City. The Kankanaeys are among those generally called the ‘Igorots,’ which means people living in the mountains (ILO 2022). Contrary to many laments that the Igorot cultures are dying out in contemporary society, they are in fact being transformed with the practices and values being adapted to the times (Kibiten 2008). Despite foreign invasions, the Kankanaeys have been able to keep their distinct knowledge systems, values, traditions, and ways of living. One of the indigenous practices that remain an important part of Kankanaey society is the observance of the ‘*Tengan*.’

‘*Tengan*’ is a time of rest for the community and the earth (Degawan 2020). Part of this phenomenon is the habit of staying at home more and doing less heavy labor. Historically, the community elders decided when to conduct the ‘*Tengan*’ in which the community is required to participate. Upon the decision and instruction of the elders, the ‘*mandu*’ or village crier/s will go around the community to announce the details of the news. During the ‘*Tengan*,’ everyone is expected to be at their own respective houses, and no one can roam around the community. Visitors are also prohibited from entering the community while the ‘*Tengan*’ is going on. If a visitor happens to have entered the community before the ‘*Tengan*’ begins, he or she will not be allowed to leave the community until the ‘*Tengan*’ has concluded. A traditional sign called ‘*Pudong*,’ a stick with its leaves knot-locked, is placed at the entrance and exit points of the community. Everyone who sees this sign will immediately know that a ritual is being conducted, and that the community is undergoing a ‘*Tengan*.’ It is imperative for everyone to respect the ‘*Pudong*’ sign, the ‘*Tengan*,’ and other community rituals, practices, and values. The ‘*Tengan*’ practice remains a highly respected practice in the Kankanaey communities as the communities expand and modernize. ‘*Tengan*’ is commonly observed in the Kankanaey communities during specific points of the agricultural cycle (Degawan 2020). ‘*Tengan*’ is also observed when the community wants to grieve during events such as the death of a community member or when a house is accidentally burned. In cases where there is a ritual in which the entire community is expected to participate, ‘*Tengan*’ is also observed. Due to social and cultural developments, the scope of the term ‘*Tengan*’ has widened to also include the practice of a person staying at home to take care of small children or anyone in the household who needs special care. Although there are differences in how the ‘*Tengan*’ is being practiced and

identified in different communities, the practice involves staying at home as a display of responsibility and respect towards the communal tradition, the community itself, a particular community member, or a particular household member. The practice also calls for a sense of community as members participate in a collective activity to respond to something that disturbs or brings discomfort to the community. As the COVID-19 pandemic represents a significant disruption to the stability of the community, the '*Tengaw*' has been practiced as a communal response. This chapter's aim is to provide descriptive accounts of how '*Tengaw*' was practiced and is still being practiced by the Kankanaeys in the City of Baguio. The chapter will also discuss the personal and communal benefits to the Kankanaey communities resulting from '*Tengaw*' observance. In addition to identifying the benefits of '*Tengaw*,' the chapter will present the implications of traditional practices for communities such as Kankanaeys and beyond. Thus, the following questions served as the guide for fulfilling the said objectives of the chapter.

- a) What benefits did '*Tengaw*' observance give the Kankanaeys during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- b) What are the implications for '*Tengaw*' practice among the Kankanaeys?
- c) What significant relevance can '*Tengaw*' practice offer the people in the post COVID-19 era?

A qualitative methodology was employed to answer the given research questions. Particularly, a phenomenological design was adapted to obtain the lived experiences of the Kankanaey participants with regards to their '*Tengaw*' observance experiences. The participants are Kankanaeys, who are well familiar with the said practice and are currently living in the different Kankanaey communities in Baguio City, Philippines. They were selected through purposive sampling. The social media application Facebook Messenger was used to confirm their participation; and after having given their consent, the participants were given a Google Meet link to take part in the focus group discussion. There were six participants who actively contributed to answering the questions posed for this research. During the Google Meet discussion, the participants engaged in an informal story-sharing session, helping them to feel at ease expressing their thoughts and experiences of '*Tengaw*' observance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The significant statements they shared were listed and grouped according to themes. However, during the writing, some statements needed clarification. Thus, some participants were again invited for a follow-up Google

Meet session. The participants opted not to disclose their personal information in the process of writing.

## **Discussion**

Despite the unusual circumstances that affected this chapter's data gathering, the online communication platforms resulted in fruitful and in-depth discussions. The following sections discuss the participants' answers to the questions raised in this chapter.

### **COVID-19 Pandemic '*Tengan*' Observance**

As stated in the earlier part of this chapter, '*Tengan*' observance is implemented through the act of staying at home. However, the '*Tengan*' applied in the past was different from the current context, especially when it comes to the duration, which is oftentimes uncertain. When carried out in the past, the '*Tengan*' would typically last a day or two (Degawan). In Baguio City, when the pandemic broke out, the border restrictions were enforced before the national declaration of lockdown. That was already indication that the '*Tengan*' that the people were observing would not just be a few days. This situation presented a different scenario from the traditional practice of *Tengan*. Also, this COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented event with effects seen at an extensive and devastating scale. Therefore, the Kankanaey's practice of '*Tengan*' becomes a more interesting and relevant question to investigate. Thus, the following sub-sections will discuss the answers to the following questions: a) How was '*Tengan*' observance different during the COVID-19 pandemic? b) How was the '*Tengan*' different from the usual lockdowns implemented in other places?

#### ***a) The Evolved '*Tengan*' Observance during the COVID-19***

This sub-section discusses the newly integrated ways added to the traditional or pre-pandemic ways of observing the '*Tengan*.' The discussion additionally compares the practice in context of the coronavirus pandemic to the traditional or pre-pandemic way of observing the '*Tengan*' as presented earlier in this chapter.

Aside from the usual practice of staying at home, the situation caused by the coronavirus pandemic called for a more comprehensive practice of the

'*Tengan*.' It was evident from the responses of the participants that the anticipation of the indefinite number of days for '*Tengan*' observance was most considered. Also, during the process of observing the '*Tengan*,' other practices were concurrently carried out in order to ease the challenge of food sustainability, which automatically became an integral part of the practice of '*Tengan*.'

*Before the 'Tengan' was strictly implemented in our place, we already anticipated the need to store food for our family for a longer period. It's a good thing that our rice from Isabela was just delivered, and so we just thought of storing other kinds of foods and medicines. (P2)<sup>1</sup>*

*We really stored food because no one really knew when the lockdown would end; but of course, not to the point like we would get everything and leave others no opportunity to have food to store also. (P6)<sup>2</sup>*

The above responses from two of the participants describe a change in how the '*Tengan*' was practiced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of just following the order that everyone in the community needed to stay at home for a specific length of time, there was already the expectation of an indefinite quarantine. Therefore, they had to secure themselves with sufficient food during the period of '*Tengan*' observance. However, in accordance with past experiences of '*Tengan*,' everyone in the community needed to do their part so that when the '*Tengan*' days came, they would not have to be engaging in unnecessary heavy activities. Therefore, anticipation and preparation became a necessary part of '*Tengan*' observance.

Another observable change from the participants' responses is how they managed to go out of their comfort zone to extend assistance to their neighbors with shortage of food supplies. Taking the initiative to help others make it through the '*Tengan*' days well became part of the COVID-19 pandemic '*Tengan*' practice.

*As part of 'Tengan' practice, I encouraged my family that we needed to share something with our neighbors who both lost their jobs and had no way to get money*

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<sup>1</sup> Participant 2 (P2) is from San Vicente, Baguio City and is originally from Sagada, Mountain Province but his family is now residing in the said *barangay*.

<sup>2</sup> Participant 6 (P6) resides at West Quirino Hill, Baguio City. His Kankanaey roots are from Bauko and Sabangan, Mountain Province.

*for food. They were from the lowlands, and it was hard for them to seek help [from] their relatives. I bravely took the risk of going out to give them a box of groceries and face masks. (P1)<sup>3</sup>*

*Even though I was fully aware that the 'Tengaw' must be [observed] strict[ly], I could not help but risk going out to help prepare relief packs for the students who were stranded. (P2)*

*I had to go out and help the people on the list of beneficiaries of the SAP [Social Amelioration Program]. (P5)<sup>4</sup>*

Compared to the pandemic situation, especially in the initial stages of the lockdowns, there were fewer problems encountered in the past 'Tengaw' events. The duration of the traditional 'Tengaw' observances was not as extensive as the lockdowns. Hence, the need to take initiatives to help others became an additional element of the contemporary 'Tengaw' observance. While people are customarily prohibited to be engaged in activities during the 'Tengaw,' the difficulties and challenges brought about by the pandemic compelled a transformed view and practice of the event. One cannot simply remain in a state of rest when the food supply is running out. Aside from the need to be active, the accounts presented by the participants also demonstrate collective actions that contributed to the success of 'Tengaw' observance during the pandemic. For their own 'Tengaw' practice to be meaningful and to be of personal and communal benefit, they had to help others to successfully undergo their own experiences of the traditional practice. Therefore, extending services to others, especially to mitigate hardships and suffering from the spread of the disease, became an essential part of 'Tengaw' observance during the crisis.

Another aspect from the participants' responses also testify to the uniqueness of 'Tengaw' observance by the Kankanaeys during the pandemic. The observance not only served to mitigate the effects of the lockdown, but the pandemic itself. As presented above, traditionally, the 'Tengaw' is also observed to mourn the loss of someone's home. After the mourning ritual is completed, an 'Ub-ubo' or 'Galatis' would be conducted to help the impacted family recover from the tragedy, primarily by assisting them in building a new house to stay. In

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<sup>3</sup> Participant 1 (P1) is from Dontogan, Baguio City tracing his Kankanaey roots from Bauko, Mountain Province. The neighborhood where he resides is mostly Kankanaey with some others from other ethno-linguistic groups.

<sup>4</sup> Participant 5 (P5) is from Upper Pinget, Baguio City whose Kankanaey roots are from Tadian, Mountain Province.

the context of the pandemic, however, the ‘*Tengan*’ and recovery activities were not done sequentially, but simultaneously implemented. The following statements from the participants convey this change:

*I see that part of the ‘Tengan’ is the need for people to find new job opportunities, especially those like me who lost their jobs due to COVID-19. I cannot just but do something while we wait for the world to become better. (P3)<sup>5</sup>*

*I don’t know, but I think with how long we had been observing the ‘Tengan,’ we could not just wait for the so-called herd immunity so that we could end this ‘Tengan’. ... We needed to help ourselves and others to recover already from this pandemic. (P4)<sup>6</sup>*

While it is true that there were numerous restrictions on what people could do during the ‘*Tengan*’ days, it became imperative also during this pandemic time that there should be action directed towards recovery even as the ‘*Tengan*’ was being observed. Whereas in the past, there was less emphasis on recovery, the Kankanaeys, facing the COVID-19 experience, have established it as an integral part of ‘*Tengan*’ observance.

#### **b) ‘*Tengan*’ vs. Lockdown**

‘*Tengan*’ observance, in which the primary activity is to stay at home, may appear just like a local term for lockdown or quarantine. However, the participants insisted that the cultural dimensions associated with this observance differentiate it from a mere pandemic mitigation measure. Observing the ‘*Tengan*’ was not just about following orders to stay put in one’s residence. This sentiment is apparent in the following responses:

*The ‘Tengan’ is in no way to be equated with just the term lockdown or quarantine. It is because the ‘Tengan’ is a culturally embedded practice of the Kankanaeys. (P6)*

*The ‘Tengan’ speaks of the culture of the Kankanaeys and the values, norms, and morals that are attached in the practice of it. Therefore, it is something far different from just mere lockdowns. (P1)*

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<sup>5</sup> Participant 3 (P3) is also a pure blooded Kankanaey whose father is a Kankanaey from Sabangan, Mountain Province and his mother is also a Kankanaey from Tadian, Mountain Province.

<sup>6</sup> Participant 4 (P4) is residing at Balacbac, Baguio City. She is from Bauko, Mt. Province but most of the time she is in Baguio City with her family and relatives because of her job.

*Though 'Tengaw' practice may have been done a little bit different[by] to adjust [to] the extensive lockdown periods, the 'Tengaw' is distinctive of its traditional background and values expected to be manifested during the practice of it. (P3)*

The cultural implications of a particular practice must not be discredited even in the presence of similarities with modern or any other practices. The 'Tengaw' as a culturally embedded practice reflects the community's history and identity. Also, it demonstrates how the people organize themselves with their distinct moral system like the 'Inayan.' 'Inayan' is the umbrella of the Kankanaey moral system. It refers to the fear of doing something wrong to others in the belief that it might bounce back to the offender. In realizing such, one must strive to act virtuously to avoid negative setbacks. The Kankanaeys always heed the "Inayan" to prevent causing oneself and others wrong. The 'Inayan,' as a moral framework of the Kankanaeys, also serves as the main component in the realization of 'Gawis,' which speaks of what is good, or goodness itself. It is also the alternative moral framework to 'Inayan.' While 'Inayan' is grounded on fear of negative personal consequences, 'Gawis' emphasizes the pursuit of goodness. Therefore, 'Gawis' adherence demonstrates the motivation to do a particular thing because it is the good thing to do, and that such thing will be for the realization of other consequent goodness. In the observance of the 'Tengaw' by the Kankanaeys during the COVID-19 pandemic, the 'Inayan' and 'Gawis' principles underlying this traditional practice demarcated the 'Tengaw' from being a mere lockdown or quarantine.

Aside from the mentioned values, which are an integral part of 'Tengaw' observance, respect is also the primary driver of the said practice, since that is what is expected of the Kankanaeys in their observance of this traditional practice. Respect is extended to the tradition handed down from many generations to the elders who decided its integration in the cultural sphere of the Kankanaeys, and to everyone whom they call 'Ib-a.' The Kankanaeys have shown that they cannot just set aside the tradition passed on through many generations. The adherence of the previous generations to the practice from the time since it was started is proof that it has been essential to the flourishing of the Kankanaey community. Therefore, it must be respected even when times are changing. Respect for the elders also speaks of the Kankanaeys' trust and recognition to the elders who decide what is best for the community. In the observance of the 'Tengaw' during the pandemic, the Kankanaeys carried out the tradition of displaying trust in the leaders to uphold the community's well-being. The respect is also extended to other people in the community who are

collectively called *'Ib-a.'* The term *'Ib-a'* refers to other people, even those who they do not know exist in this world. It would be considered *'Pilan'* (despicable) if a Kankanaey were to not respect a communal practice while others exerted effort to observe it. This high regard and respect for the others also stem from the principles of *'Inayan'* and *'Gawis.'* These concepts represent only some of the many values expected of the Kankanaeys in observing traditional practices. These cultural elements make the *'Tengan'* characteristically distinct from mere lockdowns or any other quarantine procedures.

### **Benefits of *'Tengan'* Observance**

The discussed practice of the *'Tengan'* during the COVID-19 pandemic was not just carried out for the sake of obedience to cultural traditions. Moreover, it was not just observed out of fear and apprehensions. Instead, the *'Tengan'* was primarily observed with the positive motivation of doing something good, particularly to bring collective benefits to the community. Although one can never be certain what that good or benefit might be, the spirit of *'Kasiyana'*<sup>7</sup> holds that something good will come about if one does his or her part. In this section, the specific benefits of *'Tengan'* observance as conveyed by the participants are discussed thematically.

#### ***a) Re-adaptation of the Traditional Values and Practices***

*'Tengan'* observance for the Kankanaeys has compelled them to think of ways to maintain positive thinking and well-being. In this respect, honoring traditional values was key in helping them to make sense of the crisis and to confront the effects presented by the pandemic. The following statements from the participants show the vital role of traditional values for the Kankanaeys:

*Because of the 'Tengan,' I was able to have time to reflect on many things in life that I just usually forgot because of my hectic schedules before. I was reminded of the things like 'Kasiyana,' which is helping me reconcile why the world has to go through all of this. (P1)*

*While with my family at home, I was able to have memorable story times with my mother who is fond of using deep Kankanaey [words] to describe the hard situations*

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<sup>7</sup> *'Kasiyana'* is a Kankanaey term that means 'everything will be alright' roughly translated as hopefulness.

*before, which can be comparable to this period except that it is this long. These storytelling sessions helped me recall that, yeah, there are traditional values like 'Ub-ubo' & 'Seg-ang' and other more that can be of help during these difficult times. (P4)*

*I was really thankful I had the time to call my grandparents during the 'Tengaw,' and [I] was able to realize that what I am doing to cope [with] this time of pandemic is what 'Kasiyana' is all about. (P4)*

The participants were reminded of the traditional Kankanaey values that are necessary in dealing with the fast-changing world and the current pandemic. The benefits of 'Tengaw' observance involved, however, were more than just commemorating the traditional values. Rather the traditional values like the 'Kasiyana' helped the Kankanaeys make sense of what was happening during this pandemic. Also, the traditional practices of 'Ub-ubo' or 'Binnadang' and 'Seg-ang' were applied to the immediate situation. The adaptation of the 'Kasiyana' helped the Kankanaeys to retain hope despite the many negativities around them. The value of 'Kasiyana' helped remind them that all the present challenges and difficulties would soon cease. It is a comforting and reassuring notion, reminding the people that present struggles will soon go away and be replaced with something good. For the Kankanaeys, this cultural concept promotes a hopeful anticipation of the future. However, this positive outlook does not connote mere optimism, but also requires taking necessary actions to achieve a better future.

According to the participants, the traditional 'Ub-ubo'<sup>8</sup> and 'Seg-ang'<sup>9</sup> values were also adapted to significantly help the Kankanaeys deal with the ongoing challenges presented by the crisis. As the pandemic carries on, it could be expected that these values would be further adapted to fit the present situation. 'Ub-ubo' or 'Binnadang,' as mentioned by one of the participants, is also a significant Kankanaey practice manifesting the values of solidarity and 'Seg-ang' (mercy and compassion). The term 'Ub-ubo' refers to the Kankanaeys' sense of volunteerism and self-initiatives. The presence of experienced difficulties in the

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<sup>8</sup> It is usually equated with the Filipino term 'bayanihan' which means Communal Solidarity where everyone in the community is expected to render unremunerated service for the benefit of the community or of a particular family or person in the community.

<sup>9</sup> The term can be translated as mercy and compassion. However, in the perspective of the Kankanaeys, it is more than just mercy and compassion as it is being used as part of the normal English Language. It is usually used as a moral tenet by the Kankanaeys and is always interconnected with the other Kankanaey values.

community automatically awakens the spirit of solidarity among the Kankanaeys. Therefore, the role of the leaders is not to force the people to do something, but to organize the activities in such ways that facilitate people's collective contribution to address the crisis.

Currently, this custom is mostly practiced in Kankanaey communities and other Igorot communities during the death of individuals in the community. Upon the news of the death of a community member, every household must send representatives to help the bereaved family make the coffin and carry out other preparations, such as gathering firewood to be used until the interment of the dead. If a household is unable to participate in the '*Ub-ubo*,' they must seek assistance from neighbors who have more men available to join the communal event on their behalf. Although people are not forced to participate in this communal activity, failing to do so often creates a sense of shame for those who do not take part in commemorating the deceased member of the community. Also, as part of the '*Ub-ubo*,' every household contributes at least two cups of rice to be used for the wake of the dead. The '*Ub-ubo*' practice, which has other terms in other Kankanaey communities, has been sustaining the Kankanaeys over the years, and continues to be instrumental in how they deal with the pandemic. The concept of community pantry, which became prominent due to the pandemic, is not new to the Kankanaeys, as the '*Ub-ubo*' practice of providing whatever help is needed by others (*Ib-a*), may that be material or immaterial, has been a staple of their communal life.

The '*Kasiyana*' and '*Ub-ubo*' served the role of uplifting the spirits of Kankanaeys to go through the challenging COVID-19 pandemic. As stated by the first participant, '*Kasiyana*' helped the people make sense of what was being experienced by the entire world. '*Kasiyana*' is not simply a superficial reassurance that all will be fine. Instead, it signifies the assurance of the presence of God whose power far exceeds that of human beings. Also, it is a reminder that the community is in solidarity with one another through any difficulties. '*Ub-ubo*,' on the other hand, is uplifting in the sense that community members can rely on each other instead of having to face challenges individually. The presence of a supportive community, especially during times like the pandemic, is extremely comforting. Therefore, the '*Kasiyana*' and '*Ub-ubo*,' which are integral components of '*Tengan*' observance, have contributed significantly to the pandemic response of the Kankanaeys.

*b) Reconnection with Others and with Nature*

The Kankanaeys' 'Tengan' experience has proven that the COVID-19 pandemic did not cripple the spirit of the Kankanaeys, who depend on their traditional values to overcome uncertainties and difficulties. Despite physical lockdowns, other means such as digital platforms could be utilized to maintain human-to-human connections. For the Kankanaeys, this sense of connection was sustained through 'Tengan' observance. In carrying out the 'Tengan,' the Kankanaeys took advantage of the situation to reconnect with relatives and other family members with whom they had not communicated for a long time due to being overburdened with work and various activities. Many of the participants articulated these sentiments:

*Since I was the only one here in my apartment, I took most of the time to call and text my friends and family members and also many relatives. (P5)*

*I am that kind of person who wants to talk to other people during my free time, so I did not waste time just sleeping or doing nothing during my 'Tengan.' I utilized all my devices to contact my friends, especially those abroad, to ask how they were doing during this pandemic. I'm pretty sure being asked how we are is an essential thing during this time. (P4)*

*My relatives from the province started contacting me to ask how the situation here in Baguio was and at the same time asking how we were doing here and when we would be going home. Starting there, I also kept looking for ways to contact any people I could to ask how they were doing. [It was] in the hope that it would not only reconnect us but also make those people feel good even with just those simple messages. (P2)*

For the participants, the 'Tengan' was an opportunity to reconnect with others ('Ib-a'), in particular, family members, friends, relatives, and even random strangers. Despite being social creatures, human beings sometimes forget to maintain their relationships with other people due to newfound responsibilities in a world driven by economic development. Life for the Kankanaeys in recent times has also fallen to this global trend. Therefore, 'Tengan' observance was an opportune time to reestablish old connections and form new ones.

Reconnection was also facilitated by practicing 'Seg-ang' (mercy and compassion) and 'Kasiyana.' Facing tremendous disruptions in their lives, the

Kankanaeys found the need to intensify merciful and compassionate action toward each other. They also found the need to provide mutual encouragement for a better future, in which God continues to be present in their lives despite the prevalent uncertainties of the times. Even short calls or messages saying ‘*Kasiyana*’ could provide moments of encouragement to the recipient.

In addition to the human-to-human reconnections, the participants also mentioned human reconnection with the natural environment and even the cosmos. For many Kankanaeys, relationship with the cosmos was often set aside during ‘normal’ times. Part of the purpose of ‘*Tengaw*’ observance is to provide opportunities for the people to appreciate and reconnect with the quiet beauty of the natural world. This concept can be deciphered in the following statements:

*I was able to appreciate the natural rock formations in front of our house that I see daily when waking up. I was able to appreciate the calmness I feel when looking at the swaying pine trees and many more. (P3)*

*During the peaceful nights of the ‘Tengaw,’ I couldn’t help but stay on the terrace with a cup of coffee while enjoying the view of the night sky. In the morning, as I woke up, I took time to stay again on the terrace to let my body feel the first rays of the sun, and these are some of the things I will never forget about my ‘Tengaw’ experience. (P6)*

*The ‘Tengaw’ time gave me [a] break from the limiting world of my workplace. I was able to see that mother nature needed more attention than I knew, and that is why I took the opportunity to extend this more profound view on the effects of the daily habits to the environment to my family members. (P2)*

The personal experiences shared by the participants do not represent mere sentimental value, but demonstrate a real reconnection with the natural world, which was often ignored or disregarded in the hustle bustle of daily modern life. The experience shared by the third participant also depicts a concrete action of enhancing the connection with nature. One would be able to provide environmental solutions, in the present and the future, by realizing how one’s daily actions affect the environment.

*c) Reassurance of Healing through Faith*

In addition to the social and emotional benefits connected with the practice of ‘*Tengaw*,’ this cultural tradition also consists of a spiritual dimension. ‘*Tengaw*’ observance can be characterized as an act of faith by the Kankanaeys because they trusted the process being implemented, the people carrying out significant roles in the frontlines, the initiatives of individuals in the community, and the presence of God who would provide the necessary blessings for humankind. As a display of trust, the people willingly performed their respective roles as well as avoided unnecessarily going out of their residence. As a spiritual act, the Kankanaeys believed that their faithful observance of the ‘*Tengaw*’ would bring about individual and communal healing. This sense of faith could be observed in the following responses from the participants:

*I do think we have helped the government in implementing the lockdowns. Our community's existing ‘Tengaw’ practice made it easier to accept the need for lockdowns because it is culturally embedded. We trust the people in the borders and hospitals to [do] their jobs and that we just have to do our part of observing the ‘Tengaw’ as respect to the process and works of the frontliners. With these, we are contributing to the lessening of patients infected with COVID-19. (P4)*

*In line with Maám’s answer, I also do see that the ‘Tengaw’ is really helping. I mean, we are lessening the exposure of people outside, in the public spaces, by prioritizing a higher percentage of our time inside our residences. Even more that one should stay at home if there were no need to go out even just for minutes. (P5)*

*... Just to respect our cultural practice of ‘Tengaw’ and the people who are doing their best to battle the virus, I am staying at home [to] avoid being one of the patients in the hospital. With this contribution, my hope for healing of the world [will] soon be realized. (P1)*

The above-quoted responses portray a sense of faith in other people, who would do their part to mitigate the crisis. The practice of ‘*Tengaw*’ confers indirect healing through the act of staying at home to restrict the spread of the virus. Another aspect of faith was also articulated by the participants:

*Aside from trusting those working in the frontlines that is why I stay at home; I believe also that God is always there guiding us. (P2)*

*While observing the ‘Tengaw,’ we observed that there were still good things happening and that many people are recovering compared to those who succumbed to death due to the virus. This is just proof that God is assuring us of healing despite our not being frontliners. (P6)*

These sentiments reflect the awareness of God’s role in the crisis. While the participants may not refer to ‘*Kabunyan*,’ the Kankanaey term for God, their statements highlighted the role of a transcendent and ultimate Being in the healing process. These sentiments display recognition of a God who could help the Kankanaeys overcome hopelessness, despair, and human limitations as they fight the pandemic.

### **Implications of ‘Tengaw’ Observance**

#### ***a) ‘Tengaw’ as a Call for Preservation of Traditional Practices and Values***

The traditional values and practices, integral to ‘*Tengaw*’ observance, helped in the COVID-19 response of the Kankanaeys. While ‘*Kasiyana*’ and ‘*Seg-ang*’ uplifted the spirits of the Kankanaeys, the ‘*Ub-ubo*’ or ‘*Binnadang*’ significantly manifested the sense of solidarity and community cohesion. Also, their high regard and respect for others (‘*Ib-a*’) embedded in the ‘*Inayan*’ and ‘*Gawis*’ moral frameworks strengthened cooperation and unity, which was helpful in collectively responding to the pandemic challenges. The contributions of the ‘*Tengaw*’ and its integral values serve as a call for the preservation of traditional practices and values that can help the community flourish and sustain itself during times of crisis. The participants identified only a few practices and values, but more could be highlighted, for example, the ‘*Pudong*’ practice and the values attached with this tradition. Aside from the apparent benefit of the values and practices in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, these cultural elements can also be effective in other life dealings. Further investigation can result in more insights – sociological, philosophical, and theological – of the said values and practices. If these insights are clearly articulated in the academe or other public spheres, they would significantly contribute to the effort to promote and preserve the traditional values and practices of the Kankanaeys.

***b) 'Tengaw' as an Inspiration for Resilience***

Resilience, especially *Filipino resilience*, has always been romanticized to the extent that people are oftentimes expected to overcome hardships on their own. This notion has resulted in the rampant lack of support from authorities whose responsibility is to provide the people with due support in the face of hardships. However, the kind of resilience found in the '*Tengaw*' practice does not encourage such an attitude because resilience emerges from the confluence of '*Inayan*,' '*Ub-ubo*,' '*Seg-ang*,' personal responsibility, and mutual respect. Resilience, inspired by the '*Tengaw*,' results from an inclusive society where all members support one another, make their due contribution, and display acts of mercy and compassion to each other. Resilience is found because individuals do not have to struggle through unfortunate events alone, and the effort to overcome suffering and hardship is always a communal one.

***c) 'Tengaw' as a Religious Expression***

The '*Tengaw*' is an act of faith both in God and in fellow human beings. Considering from this perspective suggests the possibility of the '*Tengaw*' being a religious expression which is most prominently on display in times of uncertainty. As a spiritual expression, it implies an inter-culturation process where there is the fusion of traditional cultural practices with the religious expressions, especially Christianity. This synthesis represents the adaptation of both perspectives to each other. Because most of the Kankanaeys are now Christians yet still practicing and respecting the traditional ways, it could be argued that the '*Tengaw*' has taken on religious dimensions as well. Theological reflections on '*Kasiyana*' would be greatly beneficial in discovering the significant ordinary God-talks (Astley 2002) of the Kankanaeys. '*Seg-ang*' would also be a meaningful area for theological reflection that would contribute to dialogue with the Christian perspective of hope through an inter-culturation approach.

***'Tengaw' in the Post Covid-19 Era***

Despite the context in which they have been practiced before, indigenous and traditional practices have proven their relevance in responding to contemporary issues. In the battle against the crisis brought about by climate change, current scientific discourses acknowledge and integrate indigenous knowledge and practices to pursue solutions due to its consistency and

relevance to recent studies (Bayrak, Li-San & Yi-ya 2020). In the face of neoliberal globalization failures and ecological degradation, indigenous knowledge is also being looked into as a source of relevant approaches to address the identified crisis. According to Tickner, “Indigenous peoples are offering very different models of world order and ways of life that are more sensitive to resource and ecological constraints” (2015, 536). The mentioned example is just one among the many studies that have “made a strong case for the role of indigenous knowledge in preparing for, coping with, and surviving disasters” (Quilo et al 2015, 105). Therefore, there is no doubt that “indigenous self-education is being reclaimed, revitalized and sustained by individuals, communities and non-Indigenous allies” due to its significant relevance in addressing different modern solutions, much more with crises and catastrophes (Tom, Huaman, and McCarty 2019, 1).

In particular, the transformative utilization of *‘Tengaw’* during the COVID-19 pandemic paved the way for another perspective regarding its cultural significance after the crisis has subsided. The continuous evolution of the practice and values attached with it is a necessary contextual reappropriation. As the Kankanaeys continue moving forward from the traumatic experience of the pandemic, the lessons drawn from the *‘Tengaw’* observance should be valuable not only for the Kankanaey people, but also for other groups in realizing how traditional practices can be extremely beneficial when they are appropriately and creatively applied to new contexts. This section discusses how the *‘Tengaw’* experience can serve as a source of inspiration for other people when they have to confront contemporary challenges.

### *a) ‘Tengaw’ as Giving/Having Time*

*‘Tengaw’* is taking a break from one’s daily routine to give or have time for something essential. The time called for may be for the family, community, or oneself. *‘Tengaw’* generally calls for anticipation of events, may those be good or bad.

#### *1. Time for Family*

*‘Tengaw’* speaks of the need to cherish the time spent at home beyond times where someone in the family is sick or passes away. It calls for sacrifices for the good of the family despite being preoccupied with work and various things in one’s life. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that life is fleeting and can be taken away without any prior

notice. The *'Tengaw'* practice reflects the Kankanaeys' understanding of this condition. However, they do not passively wait for negative things to come, but proactively deal with possible negative events by resorting to the life sustaining values embedded in their traditional practices.

### *2. Time for the Community*

*'Tengaw'* is also about sacrifice to go home to one's province or town to be with the people who lost a family member. *'Sumaa ta en makirikna'* translated as 'to go home to be in solidarity with the people afflicted,' is a mindset common to Kankanaeys. It is what can be seen in the post-pandemic era as part of *'Tengaw.'* It is to take a rest from the daily hustle-bustle of life to give time to these people who is experiencing loss of a loved one. This action of active presence in the community reflects a sense of compassion and solidarity with people beyond one's immediate family circle. This presence, *'ta en maki-Tengaw'* (to be with the afflicted), is even more meaningful than gifts of material goods for those facing tragedy.

While the *'Tengaw'* discussed in this chapter is in context of the COVID-19 crisis, it can also be carried out during good times as well. Even without the pandemic, its observance contributes to promoting community well-being, especially through the practice of *'Ub-ubo.'* The tradition of *'Ub-bo,'* the rendering of free service to the community in which every Kankanaey household has to participate, calls for refraining from traveling or going to workplaces to be with the community to accomplish a project that would benefit the whole community. It is practicing *'Tengaw'* on a community level to advance the common good. While *'Tengaw'* observance is unique to the Kankanaeys, other peoples may also have their own traditional practices meant to promote the common good that should be applied as they recover from the consequences of the pandemic.

### *3. Time for Oneself*

As the world moves on from the pandemic, and perhaps learn to live with the coronavirus, the pre-pandemic hustle bustle is also returning. Many people are feeling the familiar pressures and challenges as they

transition into a ‘new normal.’ In this process of adjusting and dealing with these changes, the ‘*Tengaw*’ can serve as a reminder to give time to oneself. Giving time to oneself means taking the necessary breaks and giving oneself the essential care to maintain physical and spiritual well-being. The ‘*Tengaw*’ can serve as an effective way to temporarily remove oneself from a situation of high stress and anxiety and to engage in something beneficial on behalf of oneself in order to recover physically and mentally. While ‘*Tengaw*’ was traditionally a communal practice to achieve a community aim, the same concept can be applied to the individual to realize a personal need.

### ***b) ‘Tengaw’ as Actualization of Values***

In line with the literal practice of ‘*Tengaw*’ as having or giving time for oneself and others, there is a need to attach ‘*Tengaw*’ activities to values and traditions. The actualization of values is necessary for ‘*Tengaw*’ not to lose its essence and meaning. The abuses of practicing ‘*Tengaw*’ as an excuse for one’s negative motives must be eliminated. For example, while rest is part of the practice, it is not meant to justify laziness or lack of interest to work.

#### *1. Sacrifice*

One of the primary values connected to the practice of ‘*Tengaw*’ is the willingness of the Kankanaeys to forego selfish personal agendas on the days in which the observance takes place. Sacrificing means being willing to give up something for the sake of something else (Tessman 2018, 376-398). Sometimes, sacrifice is required when there is a conflict between values or morals, and a compromise is necessary. However, the term sacrifice as a value in this chapter is the act of giving up something, regardless of weight and importance, to do ‘*Tengaw*’ to benefit others and oneself. The presence of this value entails a direct act that qualifies one to call taking a rest or pause ‘*Tengaw*.’ The lack of a compelling, valid, and positive reason is contrary to the fundamental values of ‘*Tengaw*,’ and the act would be judged as non-practice.

## 2. *Care*

One's willingness make sacrifices also manifests the intention of care for others. *Tengaw'* practice or observance highlights caring for something as a necessity for one's action. In the absence of care actualized through *Tengaw'* observance, the act can be mere callousness or laziness. Sacrifice and care are among the many values embedded in the *Tengaw'* practice. These embedded values serve as determining factors to evaluate the ethical nature and the appropriateness of the action carried out. The value of care present in *Tengaw'* observance, like sacrifice, can be lived out in this traditional practice during times of extreme crisis as well as in everyday life.

### c) *'Tengaw' as Meaning-Making*

*Tengaw'* requires one to take a pause amid a busy life. Taking a pause creates an opportunity for reflection, an act that can help one to make sense of life situations and discover meaning in the various happenings, especially those that are difficult and filled with challenges. Sense making is a social process because it is an activity that is always situated within a cultural and historical context (Bruner and Haste 2010). However, according to Keith Basso (1979), making sense of other people is never easy. Also, making sense of how others make sense of others, symbols, and situations, can be difficult. Nevertheless, sense making, though difficult, is an essential life activity and cannot be avoided. It is also an especially important task when the welfare of the whole society is at stake (Cardinal 1696). *Tengaw'* observance creates a valuable opportunity for the practitioner to discover the deep meanings hidden in his or her daily activities. It is also an opportunity to discover spiritual meanings in one's faith in and relationship with God

## Conclusion

Despite changes in how the *Tengaw'* practice was observed during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to its traditional observance, the age-old values attached to it were fundamentally sustained. The way that *Tengaw'* practice was carried out and the values that this practice conveys characterized the *Tengaw'* as something more than typical lockdowns or quarantine measures. This study

attempted to demonstrate how the values such as ‘*Kasiyana*’ and ‘*Seg-ang*’ and practices such as ‘*Ub-ubo*’ or ‘*Binnadang*’ significantly helped the Kankanaeys respond to the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. It also helped them respond to the events taking place in their immediate community and worldwide. From the pandemic experience of the Kankanaeys, it can be seen that traditional practices can be adapted to deal with the changing contexts. The crisis provided the Kankanaeys the opportunity to affirm the profound value of traditional cultural practices passed down through the generations. This study suggests that such practices, if thoughtfully understood and carried out, can continue to be of great use to the Kankanaeys in other situations that they will confront in the future. Moreover, the experience of the Kankanaeys suggests that other communities can also resort to their own cultural traditions to deal with crisis in their own contexts.

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# Digital Religious Communication in the Syro-Malabar Church during and post-COVID-19 Pandemic

*Robin Xavier, Mariot Jose Panjikaran, Angel Treasa Alex, and Nandini Lakshmikantha*

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the most crucial events in the recent history of humankind. In most ways, the pandemic clearly bifurcated the history of the world into pre- and post-COVID-19 eras. The impact of the pandemic has been significant on social, political, economic, professional, and religious life of countless people. Depending on the pre-existing behaviour and habits of the community these implications on the everyday life of the people varied. The pandemic was an unprecedented event that mandated certain lockdown and social distancing practices. Such measures led to closure of important social activities which encompassed religious practices, prayers, and services. For many people, religion and faith form a major part of the individual and the respective communities they belong to (Emerson 2009, 616-617). Additionally, many studies have pointed out the severe impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of people. The undesired events leading to dire lockdown situations often led to an entrapment feeling for people and certain distress was prevalent in societies. Being locked out from religious places, which were places of relief for the believers further mortified the entire situation for many people (Bentzen 2019).

These circumstances were uniquely manifested in the indigenous faith community of Syro Malabar Catholic Christians mainly situated in the multicultural land of Kerala in South India. Kerala holds the acclaim of being

the birth ground of Christianity in India and is often considered to be the 'Vatican of India' (Kochuparambil 1995). The Syro-Malabar Church represents the oldest community of Christianity in India (Madathummuriyil 2014). The official website of the Syro-Malabar Church gives a thorough study of the history and present status of the Church. Owing to its large population of about five million followers (including 480,683 migrants outside Kerala) and 8,547 priests, Syro-Malabar Church is the second-largest Eastern Church and the largest group of Saint Thomas Christians. The name 'Syro-Malabar' is a prefix where 'Syro' stands for 'Syriac' referring to the Eastern liturgy, and 'Malabar' refers to the historical name for Kerala. The name itself states the inculturation nature of society (Kaanichikaatil 2000). The society has imbibed both the values of the Catholic Church and the Kerala locale. The rich historical background has inculcated a deep traditionalism among the members of the community.

Though digitised religion was not a new idea among western societies, the Syro-Malabar Catholic Christians of Kerala were not quite familiar with the concept. The literature clearly indicates the popularity of 'digital religion' among western religious communities. However, though both 'online religion' (usage of online platforms to practice religion interactively) and 'religion online' (usage of online platforms to know general information about the community but no interactive practising of religion) spread globally (Helland 2005), few eastern religious communities adapted to it.

Religion online is where digital technology is used as a tool to propagate information or as a communication medium with respect to information passing. Also, in this regard, no sacrament will be practiced in the mediated format and digital media served as a supplementary aid for the believers. However, coming to online religion, the entire faith and religious practice exists through digital technology or in essence, Church is in the cyberworld, and every sacrament is practiced virtually.

In particular, it can be said that South Asian religious communities remained hostile to online religion though religion online had been popular in those countries (Xu and Campbell 2018). The present research aims to identify the implications of the pandemic on the faith and religious practices among the Syro-Malabar Catholic Christians of Kerala through the theoretical lens of Religious Social Shaping of technology (RSST) by Campbell. For a comprehensive analysis, the online religious behaviour of both the senders (priests) and receivers (believers) of religious communication in this community was analysed during the pandemic and in a post-pandemic scenario (Campbell 2005; Campbell 2016).

## Materials and Methods

Quantitative data was collected using the survey method with the help of a structured questionnaire. The pilot study was conducted to assess the reliability and validity of the questionnaire by taking a convenient sample of 55. The Split Half Reliability Coefficient (Frey 2018) was calculated, and it was found to be 0.7691. The final data were collected and considered for analysis.

For analysing the situation during the pandemic, data was collected by sending the questionnaire to the respondents using an online platform. The collection of data using an online platform is suggested by Campbell and Evolvi (2019). The survey was carried out two weeks post-cessation of all religious practices involving the public due to the pandemic situation, during the month of April 2020. The post-pandemic situation was analysed two months post resumption of all religious practices involving the public during the month of January 2022. The identification of post pandemic situation was made based on the cessation of offline religious services and activities in the churches belonging to Syro-Malabar denomination in Kerala. All the services had resumed in these churches starting from November 2021. The study is presented in two parts where the first part presents the scenario during the pandemic and the second part focusses on the most recent post-pandemic scenario. The data for the first part is secondary data taken from a previous work published by the authors pertaining to religious communication during the pandemic.

## Participants

The survey was conducted among both religious communicators (priests) and receptors (followers) belonging to Syro-Malabar Catholic Church of Kerala, South India. Separate questionnaires were drafted for both categories, catering to their role in religious communication. The priests were evaluated for their role as religious communicators, while the believers were assessed for their role as receptors of religious communication. For the first part, the sample size of priests was 152 by the method of convenience sampling, and the sample size of believers was 532 by the process of snowball sampling. Different sampling techniques were chosen for both categories due to differences in the nature of the concerned groups under study. For the second part, the sample size of priests was 150 by the method of convenience sampling, and the sample size of believers was 512 by the process of snowball sampling. Different sampling

techniques were chosen for both categories due to differences in the nature of the concerned groups under study.

## Results

### During the Pandemic

The analysis of the data obtained is presented under two sections; the first provides the perception of religious communicators (priests), and the next provides the perception of receptors (believers).

#### *Views of Religious Communicators (Clergy/Priests)*

**Table 1: Age-wise distribution of respondents**

Age	Percentage
25-35	33.60%
36-45	33.60%
46-55	15.10%
56 and above	17.80%

The age distribution data show that a significant share of respondents belonged to the younger age group (25-45) (Table 1). Since the survey was conducted through an online platform, this confirms that the younger generation of religious communicators is more present in the online world.

**Table 2: Do you agree with the usage of digital technology for religious purposes?**

Age	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
25-35	62.75 %	33.33 %	3.92%	0.00%	0.00 %
36-45	41.18 %	58.82 %	0.00%	0.00%	0.00 %

46-55	39.13 %	60.87 %	0.00%	0.00%	0.00 %
56 and above	48.15 %	33.33 %	11.11 %	7.41%	0.00 %

As evident from Table 2, the majority of the priests (95.39%) expressed that they either strongly agreed or agreed to the usage of digital technology platforms for religious purposes. While a small portion of the group remained neutral, the only age group that expressed disagreement belonged to the older age group. The disagreement of the older age group may be due to their lack of adaptability to the new technologies.

**Table 3: Do you use digital technology platforms to reach out to devotees?**

<b>Only at times of social distancing</b>	<b>More frequently in times of social distancing</b>	<b>Always</b>	<b>Never</b>
12.50%	25.00%	57.20%	5.30%

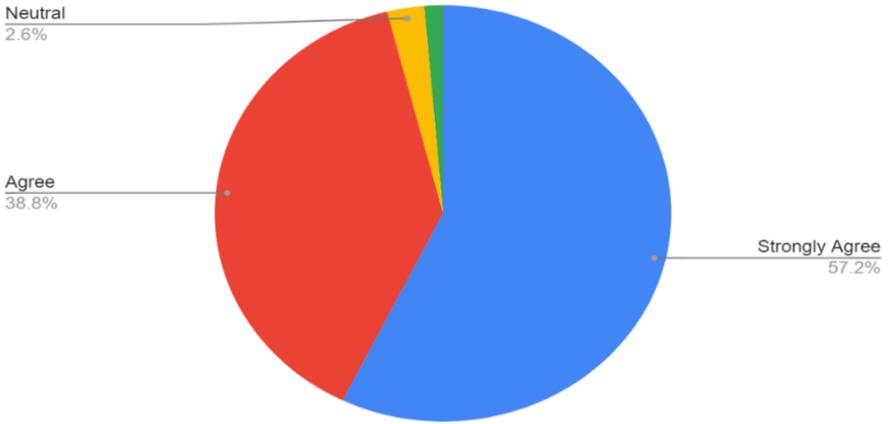
Overall, 82.2% of the total respondents confirmed the usage of online platforms for religious purposes. About 37% of the communicators agreed that they had been affected by the COVID-19 induced social distancing in a positive way towards the use of digital technology platforms for religious purposes (Table 3).

**Table 4: When did you start to use digital technology platforms for religious purposes?**

<b>Before COVID-19 social distancing</b>	<b>Recently due to COVID-19 social distancing</b>	<b>Never</b>
81.60%	13.20%	5.30%

The data in Table 4 confirm the analysis obtained from Table 3. The percentage of the people who agreed with the usage of online platforms (82.2%) matches with the percentage of people who were using the resources even before COVID-19 social distancing (81.6%).

Social media platforms are an effective tool for communicating religious messages at times of social distancing. Do you agree?



**Figure 1. Effectiveness of digital technology for religious communication**

As evident from Figure 1, the majority of the religious communicators (96%) concurred with the statement 'digital technology platforms are an effective tool for communicating religious messages at times of social distancing.' The result is supported by official circulars released by the authorities of the Syro-Malabar Church in Kerala regarding the use of media for the dissemination of religious messages.

Coming to the concordance in the Church regarding digital technology usage for religious communication (according to communicators), 65.1% responded positively that they were asked by the religious authorities to use digital technology platforms for religious purposes during social distancing. However, as mentioned on the Kerala Catholic Bishop Conference (KCBC) website, official circulars were released by the authorities stating the uniqueness of the COVID-19 pandemic situation and the measures to be followed. Hence, the negative response of 25% is a possible indication of a communication barrier in the chain of command.

While analysing the expertise in digital technology usage of the communicators (Self-evaluation), it is interesting that 63.8% of the priests thought that they were well-equipped to tackle digital technology for religious purposes. Although about 96% of the communicators applauded the use of digital technology platforms, the evident gap of more than 30% among the

religious communicators does raise the concern of a 'technological barrier' (McClure 2017).

**Table 5: 'Online' religious practices through digital technology have more attendees than services in the Church. Do you agree?**

<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
10.50%	17.80%	20.40%	35.50%	15.80%

Only 28.3% of the communicators were in favour of the statement 'online religious practices through digital technology have more attendees than services in the church' while over half of the respondents (51.3%) disagreed with it. A significant portion of the respondents also chose to be neutral on the statement (Table 5). Overall, it is observed that though 96% of communicators support the usage of digital technology, only about 82% of them use digital technology for religious purposes. There was a significant agreement (86.09% of the communicators) to the impact of social distancing on the digital technology usage pattern (of receptors) for religious practices (according to communicators).

**Table 6: Will you continue to use digital technology platforms for religious purposes after-08 the lockdown?**

<b>Age</b>	<b>Apart from Holy Mass, I will continue to use digital technology for religious purposes</b>	<b>I will continue using for all religious services</b>	<b>I will not use digital technology platforms for any religious purposes</b>	<b>None of the above</b>
25-35	54.90%	41.18%	1.96%	1.96%
36-45	49.02%	45.10%	3.92%	1.96%
46-55	52.17%	21.74%	13.04%	13.04%
56 and above	44.44%	18.52%	14.81%	22.22%

The communicator group was asked if they would continue the usage of digital technology for religious purposes after the lockdown. The results were analysed specifically in the context of the Holy Mass. Table 6 brings out the importance of proximal participation in the Holy Mass as perceived among the clergy. More than half of the group suggests that Holy Mass requires physical attendance. However, about 30% of the population agreed to use digital technology platforms for all purposes. This could be treated as building a bridge between ‘religion online’ and ‘online religion.’

***Views of Religious Receptors (Believers)***

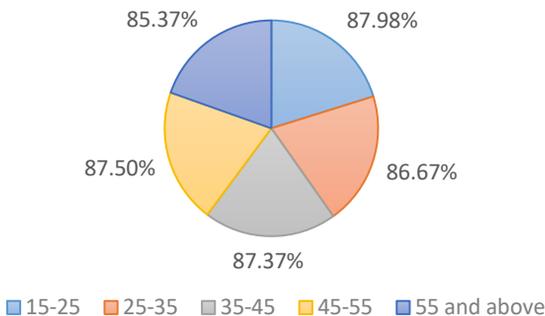
*Age-wise distribution of receptors*

**Table 7: Age-wise distribution of respondents**

Age	Percentage
15-25	34.40%
25-35	31.02%
36-45	17.86%
46-55	9.02%
56 and above	7.71%

The age distribution data reveals that similar to the age group of communicators who took part in the study, the younger age group (25-45) participated more which could be attributed to the increased proficiency of the younger generation with the online world and adaptation issues of the older group (Table 7).

**Have you ever used digital technology platforms to access religious programs ?**



**Figure 2. Usage of digital technology platforms for religious purposes (Age-wise data)**

The usage pattern of digital technology for religious purposes among believers is depicted in Figure 2. This is a clear implication that usage of digital technology for religious purposes is quite popular among all age groups, with the aggregate average being 87.2%. This indicates that the community is present in large numbers on the digital technology platforms, but it contradicts the result provided by the communicators, which says that only 28% of them are able to find more followers online. This could be explained by the possibility that the receptors and communicators are not present on the same platforms.

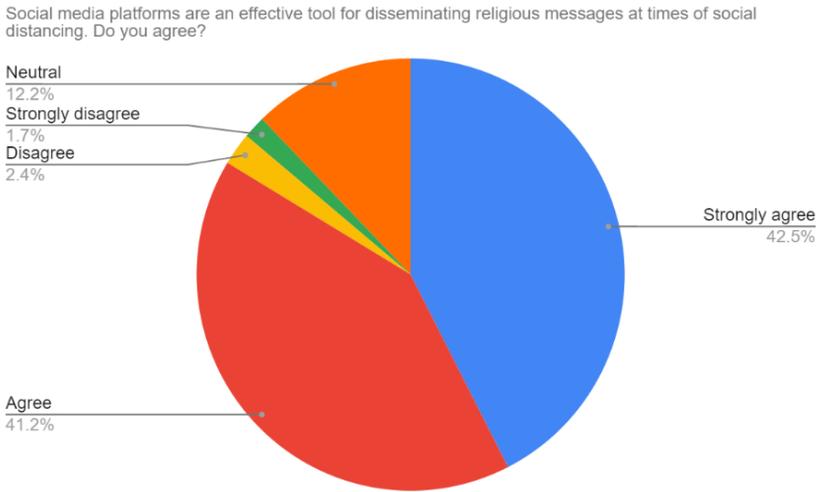
**Table 8: Do you support the usage of digital technology for streaming religious programs?**

<b>Only at times of social distancing</b>	<b>More frequently in times of social distancing</b>	<b>Always</b>	<b>Never</b>
18.20%	19.50%	55.10%	7.10%

**Table 9: When did you start to use digital technology platforms for religious purposes?**

<b>Before COVID-19 social distancing</b>	<b>Recently due to COVID-19 social distancing</b>	<b>Never</b>
76.30%	14.30%	9.40%

Beyond doubt, it can be seen from Table 8 and Table 9 that a major part of the population supports the usage of digital technology for religious purposes at all times. Also, there is a significant part of the population whose usage was affected by social distancing protocols. The perception of the receptors is consistent with the views of the communicators presented earlier.



**Figure 3. Effectiveness of digital technology for religious communication**

As seen from Figure 3, the majority of the receptors agreed to the statement ‘digital technology platforms are an effective tool for communicating religious messages at the time of social distancing.’ Furthermore, the receptor community at large (83.4%) agreed that the current social situations had increased the usage of digital technology to meet their spiritual needs. The laity population reacted on par with the reaction of the priests in the matter of Holy Mass, implying that proximal participation for Holy Mass is always preferred (77.80%). However, a notable disagreement of 13.9% was also observed. In agreement with the communicators’ opinion in this regard, there is a leaning tendency towards ‘online religion,’ exhibited by the receptors as well. An examination of the preferences of receptors in choosing communicators reveals that 71% of the respondents admitted that though they followed religion online, and they often preferred programs by priests of their liking to programs by their own parish priest. The trend exhibited by receptors in the choice of religious programs, communicators and the type of digital technology platform preferred by them clearly explains the lack of viewership felt by the communicators.

**Table 10: Do you think the authorities of the Catholic Church endorse the use of digital technology for religious purposes?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Only at times of emergencies</b>	<b>I do not know</b>
47.10%	7.60%	18.00%	27.40%

As per the Vatican webpage “The Church and Internet,” the Catholic Church has officially endorsed the use of media for religious purposes, under special circumstances such as the pandemic. The supporting views of the Church in this matter have been expressed publicly and clearly by the officials. However, the survey results indicate that the message is not yet properly conveyed among the receptors.

**Table 11: Will you continue to use digital technology platforms for attending religious services after the lockdown?**

<b>Age</b>	<b>Apart from Holy Mass, I will continue to use digital technology for religious purposes</b>	<b>I will continue using for all religious services</b>	<b>I will not use digital technology platforms for any religious purposes</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>
15-25	60.11%	20.22%	9.84%	9.84%
25-35	55.15%	24.85%	10.30%	9.70%
36-45	66.32%	18.95%	12.63%	2.11%
46-55	60.42%	20.83%	12.50%	6.25%
56 and above	63.41%	12.20%	19.51%	4.88%

A similar trend is observed in results obtained from communicators and receptors. It is noteworthy that the trend remains uniform irrespective of the age group. The community considers Holy Mass very seriously, and the concept of spiritual communion is not yet widely accepted.

## Post-Pandemic Scenario

The analysis of the data obtained is presented under two sections; the first provides the perception of religious communicators (priests), and the next provides the perception of receptors (believers).

### *Views of Religious Communicators (Clergy/Priests)*

**Table 12: Have you resumed religious services to normal formats in the post pandemic scenario?**

Yes	%	No	%	Partially	%
133	88.67%	0	0.00%	17	11.33%

The results show that all of the religious communicators have resumed the services to normal formats either fully or partially which is a huge transition from the tendencies shown towards 'online religion.' Some of the parishes or priests may be following partial modes because of existing regional restrictions or COVID-19 protocols.

**Table 13: If the services have resumed, what is the trend observed in the number of participants during the post pandemic times?**

Remains the same	%	There is an increase	%	There is decrease	%
12	00%	0	00%	138	00%

The trend observed in the numbers of the participants for the services in the post-pandemic scenario indicates an interesting fact. Over 90% of the communicators felt that there has been a decrease in the number of participants. This indicates that though the services have resumed and most of the priests are doing offline services, the believer community has not entirely returned to church.

**Table 14: Are you conducting religious services through online platforms in the post pandemic scenario?**

All ser- vices	%	Not at all	%	For special services/days	%
9	6.00%	111	74.00%	30	20.00%

Further, priests were asked if they still conducted religious services through online platforms in the post pandemic scenario and a significant number of religious communicators (74%) responded that they are not using online platforms at all. This number along with the numbers from Table 13 suggest that though the churches and priests have resumed the services to normal formats, there is some resistance on the part of the believers.

**Table 15: If you are still using online platforms for religious communication, what is the trend observed in the number of viewers during the post pandemic times?**

Remains the same	%	There is an increase	%	There is a decrease	%	Do not know	%
0	0.0	2	5.1	34	87.1	3	7.6
	0%		3%		8%		9%

It can be seen that over 85% of the religious communicators acknowledged a decrease in the number of viewers. Therefore, in both platforms for religious communication, there has been an observable difference in the number of participants. This could be an indication of people moving away from the faith and religious practices.

**Table 16: Do you feel that the believer community prefer to continue attending religious services through mediated platforms?**

All of them	%	None of them	%	Very few	%	Most of them	%
11	7.33%	26	17.33%	103	68.67%	10	6.67%

An aggregate number of 140 (93.33%) priests responded that the believer community does not prefer to continue attending religious services through mediated platforms.

*View of receptors (believers)*

**Table 17: Have the services at your Church resumed back to normal in the post pandemic scenario?**

Yes	%	No	%	Partially	%
447	87.30%	0	0.00%	65	12.70%

The response of the believers aligns with that of the religious communicators and all of the respondents agreed that the services at their church have resumed to the normal formats.

**Table 18: If the services have resumed, do you attend the church as it was during the pre-pandemic times?**

Yes	%	No	%
371	72.46%	141	27.54%

Though a significant percentage of believers (72.26%) reported to be going to church, over 25% still did not go to church as they used to in the pre-COVID-19 times. The reasons for this could again be a lack of enthusiasm to regain the previous momentum.

**Table 19: Are you attending religious services through online platforms in the post pandemic scenario?**

For all services	%	Not at all	%	For special services/days	%
33	6.45%	337	65.82%	142	27.73%

The believers' responses are on par with the observations recorded by the priests also. Also, in some places there are regional restrictions and variations depending on the unique pandemic situations at the region. Moreover, some of

the administrations have continued to place a number of restrictions on large gatherings which could also be a reason for believers to choose online platforms during special services.

**Table 20: “After attending the services through mediated platforms during the pandemic, I believe that it is okay attend Holy Mass/ Sunday services through mediated platforms.” To what extent do you agree with the statement.**

Strongly Disagree/		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree	
%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
92	17.9		42.7		20.31		16.80		2.1
17.97%	7%	219	7%	104	%	86	%	11	5%

The responses to the statement were measured on Likert scale; the results indicate that although the maximum number (42.77%) of respondents disagreed, a significant percentage also chose to be neutral. Only few of the respondents expressed agreement to the statement.

### Discussions

In continuance of the survey, the authors collected information from Socialblade (a website that measures online viewership and also conducted personal interviews with Directors of Goodness Television, Shalom Television, and Shekinah Television. In addition, personal interviews were conducted with Dr Ciby Irimbinakkal, Secretary of KCBC Media Commission and Bishop Chittuparambil, an archbishop of Syro-Malabar Catholic Church. The collected data confirms that a brief change to online religion was indeed transient and not permanent. The pandemic induced a stage of transition for the Syro-Malabar Catholic Community in the practising of ‘digital religion.’ Again, the behaviour is consistent with the evolution of religion in response to the evolution of media, as suggested by Günter Thomas (2015).

Cheong (2016) argues that although “new media is vital for religious communication,” an effective merging of the new forms of mediation with the old communication practices ensures the effective evolution of media for

religion. The argument is validated through our current research. The Syro-Malabar community, both communicators and receptors, have adapted to the new media without abandoning their traditional religious practices. The community is also keen on maintaining an offline-online balance in religious communication, as suggested by Campbell and Lovheim (2017). However, they are particular about the practising of sacraments (Kanichikattil 2000), and it was found that Church authorities approached government organisations seeking permissions to resume religious practices at the church.

Although the unprecedented social situations gave momentum to ‘digital technology usage for religious purposes,’ the impact was temporary. Furthermore, this implicates a clear scenario of negotiating and communal framing as per the RSST theory of Campbell. Moreover, it can be said that the community exhibits similar behaviour as that of ‘bounded religious communities’ when it comes to matters of online religion in concordance with the findings of Campbell and Golan (2011).

The traditionality of the community is reflected in their view of ‘online sacraments.’ As per the official statement of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, Holy Mass through media is an option but not a substitute. To quote an official statement given in a YouTube video by Mar Tony Neelankavil, Auxiliary Bishop (Late) of Masuccaba, “Holy Mass is a celebration of communion and exceptions cannot be permanent solutions. The reluctance to accept online platforms for all religious purposes could be a small hindrance in the path to complete ‘online religion.’ However, as per Campbell (2014), religion does not allow the media to shape them passively; instead, religion tends to shape the new media. It is to be expected that the Syro-Malabar Catholic community will follow the pattern.

Apart from Holy Mass, the community has a welcoming attitude towards online religion and prefers to use it even after the lockdown. Hence, satisfying the criteria enunciated by Helland (2005), it can be said that the COVID-19 induced lockdown has been instrumental in a transition of the Kerala Syro-Malabar Catholic community to the realm of ‘online religion.’ The new media phenomenon, described as ‘induced online religion,’ however, is momentary. The community is not welcoming online religion as much as it is applauding religion online.

All these factors together could suggest that the online religious behaviour of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Community can be defined using the Religious Social Shaping of Technology (RSST) theory put forward by Campbell. With the rich traditional and historical background of the community, it is evident that they choose to abide by their core beliefs when it comes to matters of

religion, no matter how technologically equipped they are. The community hence negotiates with the 'new media' in the light of these and frames their own digital behaviour.

## **Conclusions**

### **Induced Online Religion in Syro-Malabar Catholic Church**

The recent COVID-19 outbreak induced lockdown and social distancing did encourage the laity to use digital technology platforms for their religious practices. In this context, the survey-based study conducted among the Syro-Malabar Catholic community of Kerala [India] has revealed an interesting pattern of digital technology usage among them. There was increased use by the communicators (priests) for delivering religious content and the receptors (believers) on digital technology platforms for meeting their religious needs.

The research finds that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on religious communication through online platforms, though transient. Induced online religion was a derived term from online religion as defined by Helland. The authors have suggested this term to indicate that the exhibited transition of the Syro-Malabar Church community towards online religion has been induced by the social event of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also indicative of the influence of the social circumstances on the negotiation and communal framing layers of the RSST lens. The trend was temporary and went back to 'religion online' once the situations went back to normal. The implications can be generalised for Catholics in Kerala (India), considering the prospective influence of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Community. Further studies can be done to identify similar phenomena in other communities.

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## **Ecclesial Communion: Reflections from the Pandemic Experience in Thailand**

*John Patrick Murray, OSA*

With Pope John XXIII having called the Second Vatican Council, the year 1964 was a time of uncertainty in the Catholic Church. What did this Council mean? Where was it going? In his then essay, “The Christian in Diaspora,” Thomas Merton commented, “It is no secret that the Church finds herself in crisis, and the awareness of such a fact is ‘pessimism’ only in the eyes of those for whom all change is tragedy” (Quoted in Horan 2021).

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the Church has been facing another time of crisis, a crisis arising out of tragedy but not defined by it. The Church could be better described as facing multiple crises at this time, for a pandemic is much more than a health crisis, as its impact adversely disturbs the very fabric of life of society and of Church. With social distancing and restrictions on gatherings, the Church has had to rethink and adapt how it operates as a pastoral agent in society. Shutting its doors and operating worship online has been one necessary, critical, and core change to its practice.

This pandemic has highlighted so much more than the one, vital issue of health for other ongoing vital issues have also arisen in the process. A pandemic serves to highlight the good and bad in our world, in our social structures, magnifying both strengths and weaknesses. It opens up a vista of issues and challenges. While a pandemic magnifies human suffering, it also lights up possibilities for responding to them. This analysis readily applies to Church.

Pope Francis reflected, “We do not come out of a crisis the same. We either come out better or worse.”<sup>1</sup> Francis went further as he challenged us to build a new era out of this pandemic. So we not just aim to reopen the doors of

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis speaking to VAX Live – May 5, 2021

church buildings but for much more – a new era of Church and world. Communion is a core value of Church that can be applied to this challenge, for embarking on a new era harkens us to deeper communion. Any lasting option for a new era will have a spiritual heart so as to be a truly human endeavour. This is time to reflect on what sort of Church we wish to be at the heart of who we are. Before proceeding, let me first introduce the context from which it arises.

### **The Context**

I am an Australian Catholic priest and a member of the Order of St Augustine on mission assignment to work with refugees and migrants in Thailand. In pursuit of this mission, I am with Caritas Thailand and living in Bangkok. Over my 15 years here, presiding at Sunday Eucharist at the local Assumption Cathedral for the English speaking community has become part of my pastoral ministry routine. With time, this has evolved naturally from a Mass commitment to a committed pastoral responsibility. My pastoral focus for attention here is this specific faith community. Every Sunday at Assumption Cathedral, Eucharist is celebrated in English at 10 am. Before the start of the pandemic, there was a regular Mass attendance of between 400 and 500. Those coming represented a diverse population: Western nationalities from Europe, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia; Asian nationalities including Filipinos, Thais, Singaporeans, and Indonesians; and various others whether from Guatemala, Africa, or beyond. What they all share is a proficient level of English as the lingua franca for this community.

This faith community consists of both single adults and families. They are mostly adults with a business or professional background. Structurally, this community enjoys its own life. Every Sunday, people gather and celebrate Mass. Its integrity as a community, however, is not as easily defined for its belonging within the wider ecclesial community is complex. It exists as a sub-unit of a cathedral parish. Its ex-pat or foreign membership gives it its identity within the local Church. This source of identity serves to distance it from the mainstream local Church community. Language can be named as its defining criterion, but language becomes a barrier which does not sufficiently define nor describe the complexities underlining its existence. This faith community stands as a unique entity within the complexities of culture, ecclesial structures and power, and a foreign milieu.

## Purpose

Healthy communication is essential for healthy community, even more so for the community to live and grow better and stronger through a pandemic, a time of crisis. For the sake of focus, authority and leadership are the chosen, key pillars for healthy communication. So, the community acts as a building block for the rise of a better world.

For a community re-gathering post pandemic, communication is a key tool. It will act to facilitate good ministry, further evangelization, and build a stronger Church. This period of transition offers an opportunity for affirmative action in building up Church in line with the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, which presents the image of Church as a pilgrim Church, a Church that is the People of God. As a pastoral tool, communication is a key for pursuing and reinforcing this Church called for by the Vatican Council, but it does not stand alone. Communication is not the end but a means to the end.

Church is not an end in itself. It is rather an imperfect institution. History has shown how it has failed as an institution as was seen in the 2019 Amazon Synod. The Amazon is a vast region where the Church has not been able to respond to the needs of the people. A key issue was the shortage of priests which has meant communities not being able to access the Eucharist. With this Synod, a number were hoping that the Pope would respond by opening ordination to married men. This, nonetheless, was not to be the response. Rather the Pope took a deeper view of Church, noting in his Post-Synodal Exhortation *Querida Amazonia* that the priest shortage must be seen as an opportunity for the Catholic Church to “awaken new life in communities” (no. 93). A worthwhile response was to come from the roots of Church. Francis stated, “We need to promote an encounter with God’s word and growth in holiness through various kinds of lay service that call for a process of education – biblical, doctrinal, spiritual and practical – and a variety of programs of ongoing formation” (Ibid).

Looking back, this Church Synod response to a regional crisis shows a way today for Church responding to the pandemic and to creating new methods of mission in a changed world. It is not about mending institutional structures or quickly applying new rules and guidelines. Rather it goes to the core of who we are as Church, our spiritual roots. Karl Rahner, a German theologian of last century, made his great prophetic claim that “the Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not be a Christian anymore” (Quoted by Carroll 2004). How true!

It is from this spiritual baseline that any Church worth having into the future will begin. Any reform will not be achieved through implementing universal programmes and busy projects. Rebuilding Church is primarily a spiritual exercise, giving rise to new structures, new ways, and life-giving mission. Coming out of the shared experience of the pandemic is about much more than returning to Mass in the one, shared worship space.

### **Core Issues Affecting a Faith Community**

For any worthwhile change to happen as part of a new era, one must tackle core issues. Otherwise, change remains incremental. For Church as institution, this means maintaining the institution using its known, self-perpetuating systems. A maintenance approach does not facilitate targeted and good change to occur. Change must go deeper, attacking root causes of institutional malaise. The term ‘end of an era’ implies change that is lasting and deep, requiring more than personnel or operational shifts.

For Church, the challenge is to uphold and further its focus on evangelization and life-giving mission belonging to all the faithful. This moves beyond institution and maintenance to building up the living image of Church envisioned by the Second Vatican Council, a pilgrim Church that involves and enlivens the People of God. Within a traditional model of Church with its pre-eminence given to a hierarchical structure and system of power, this does not happen. In successfully aiming at this better life of the faith community, it is proposed that the primary themes for consideration are authority, leadership, and communication – the three pillars. The thinking is that the latter pillar is based on the first two being in place.

#### **Authority of the Community**

Purposely, the term chosen has been authority, not power. Authority is bestowed by a higher power or virtue. Power may be too easily assumed and abused. With authority comes trust and higher levels of responsibility and expectation. The holding of authority supports and requires the good exercise of power for incompetency, the failure to use power or use it incompetently or corruptly will see authority lost. Power is real. It is neither good nor bad. Rather, it is judged by how it is exercised. Power cannot be denied. It exists for good purpose, for making decisions at all levels. In the Christian model, power is to

be used for service and the good of the community. It comes with authority that lies within the community.

As named, our “10 am English Mass community” does not live a life unto itself. Its authority comes from the Church to which it belongs. As a gathering community, acting as part of the universal Church, it has its authority. By nature, Church structures are complex and hierarchical. It is within such an ecclesial setting that our community exists. Along with these normal hierarchical structures of institutional Church, this community exists in Thailand where society, culture, and language are highly hierarchical within a complex, social structure that mirrors and supports the hierarchical structure of Thai society. As a community in its own right, our faith community is a thriving community due to foreign nationals within Bangkok needing to find a church community to which to belong. However, in responding to its arising needs, the lack of a perceived ‘sympathetic foreign’ space in the local wider Church arises as an issue needing attention. In its identity, the community does not stand on its own, nor does it seek to. Instead, it seeks a sympathetic sounding board when issues arise. This is highlighted during the plight of a pandemic.

The issue of authority leads to two key issues. Firstly, there is a need to affirm a leadership of the community that is competent in both representing the community and acting in its name with the appropriate Church authorities on issues affecting its normal life. Secondly, effective communication channels must be built to sustain and nourish the life of this specific community.

As just hinted, the pandemic has served to highlight core weaknesses in leadership and communication, which were already in existence. Where authority is strictly hierarchical and divorced from the grassroots, a foreign community may be hit with a double whammy effect of not knowing and not understanding every decision that comes its way from Church authorities. This leads to an experience at the grassroots of being disconnected, of being a community of a universal Church landing in foreign territory. This creates institutional tensions. Within the pandemic, these tensions become more noticeable with more serious consequences arising due to the serious matters brought forward by the pandemic. The challenge is to make a timely response to create a better and more workable system that gives respectful recognition to the rightful authority at the grassroots. Besides understanding, much more is needed – *communion*.

## Lay Leadership

The Second Vatican Council model of Church as People of God upholds an established, rightful, and appropriate authority of this community. The Council spoke of the priesthood of the baptized which, as it says, is a shared priesthood of all the faithful, arising from their baptism. Parallel to and separate from, but not above, is the priesthood of the ordained. Both priesthoods stand together, having their own integrity, role, and purpose. While the two are distinct, they need each other and need to work together. Ministry is not the domain of an elite, powerful, professional class. Rather it is the shared responsibility of all the baptized faithful, with each rightfully exercising their ministry according to their role and designation in the Church. So clerical ministers work with lay ministers as equal partners, each with distinct function and responsibility. The pandemic shows that this is not only good theology but an effective way for Church to meet its mission of preaching the Gospel within any new, post-pandemic era. It is the vision of Pope Francis for a renewed Church in the Amazon. The approach of Church is not imposing mission programmes from on high but enlivening Church at the grassroots for mission.

The sharing of leadership and responsibility in mission shows Church as the humble servant to the world. This is key to the purpose of Church. It is a living sign of God who loves the world without reservation and cares for all. It is not to be a triumphant Church proclaiming from on high as some powerful institution in the world. Instead, Church is called to be a servant to a fragile humanity, whose authority is for doing good and whose power is for exercising service to build up humanity. This is the Church that accompanies its people through a pandemic – a truly powerful Church. It is within this context that Church leadership shapes itself.

As Church went into lockdown and ministered online to a more physically distant faithful, one clear lesson from this pandemic is that we as Church are more than a physical community. It has been demonstrated strongly that we, a diverse body of people, are more than community. We are the Body of Christ called to communion. Out of this pandemic, we see that this is no longer a static, spiritual theology but a lived and felt reality. Spiritual communion is real and not just some excuse for what may not be possible in a physical church setting.

This is a ‘once in a lifetime’ learning that is best neither lost nor denied. It is a key element that will lead Church to its new era. Interestingly, Pope Francis talks of the new era but never defines it. That is because we do not know what it will be, while we believe that it will be. The evolution of the new era, the

building up of its realities, the blossoming of its qualities will happen through the life-giving mission of the Church being assumed at the grassroots. It cannot be simply defined by a hierarchical leadership and given by them to the membership to follow. That is not life-giving. That does not respect the priesthood and ministry of all, a core value for good Church. This calls forth communication based on the values of participation and inclusion over hierarchy and of authority over power as this will serve to deepen that communion sought for the sake of a Church that is a sign of God's love to the world, the Body of Christ.

### **Communication**

Within an equal partnership approach to authority and leadership, our faith community can establish life-giving communication that acts for building communion. This reflects a Second Vatican Council Church. The pandemic has challenged Church on how to gather. It has chosen social media, using Facebook, YouTube, and Zoom as the media for worship. For many months, worship and life no longer primarily depended on physical gathering of communities. This forced practice has opened up questions of communication for Church. What media to use? How to use what is chosen? What impact is this having on its people and communities?

When communities cannot gather, their very fabric of unity is questioned. Community can no longer be based on just physical presence, but on something else more sustaining. The question is: "On what, does Church base its unity, its community? The response has to be much more than the routine answer of "going to church." The Church has the answer in its theological toolkit. The union of people with each other and God is too simply defined by human community. This union is more aptly reflected in naming it as communion. This recognizes that our coming together is more than physical. As a faith community, any coming together recognizes the spiritual dimension. This dimension is at the heart of who we are.

During the period of pandemic lockdown, the term reclaimed by Church for defining our coming together in worship has been spiritual communion. This pandemic has made the Church appreciate its own wisdom that had been lost or overlooked. It is the wisdom where the stress is on spiritual over physical. Such a stress is not to downgrade either dimension of human reality. Rather it reinforces that the spiritual and the physical, the human and divine are not opposing forces. Christian theology teaches that the human and the divine

belong together. The spiritual is part of human life. It is at the core of human life.

In reclaiming its focus on communion, the Church is reclaiming spirituality. This raises consequences for its life and organization. This will result in stressing participation and inclusion over hierarchy. It will result in expanding communication to all sorts of possibilities for the sake of building up communion. This has untold consequences for Church in its mission of preaching the Good News of the Kingdom. Thus, communication is not simply from the top down but two way and collaborative.

The pandemic has shown that hierarchically based communication structures are unsatisfactory in engaging the community and in providing the information needed to organize, plan, and make decisions. If communion is the aim of Church, and Church is its people, then communication is about cooperation, operating at the grassroots, and is user friendly. Communication thus works to allow community not just to grow, but to deepen into communion. What does this mean in reality?

At the time of this writing, the regular Sunday greeting and communication outside church can no longer happen for obvious reasons. This may be seen as a loss. I would beg to differ as it highlights an opportunity. The normal Sunday chat after Mass may be very friendly, but generally stays at the surface and far too quick. In times of lockdown and social distancing, one has to work much harder at making communication happen within the community. What one may note in pastoral practice these days is that there is much more effort put into reaching out. This is happening in a two-way direction between pastoral agents and members of the community. There is no other choice when people are not there. The resulting communication tends to be more purposeful as it is dealing with matters of import. Within the same communication dynamic, there are fewer people entering in communication. One could say that communication is more quality, less quantity.

The numbers are reached in other ways than the smile and handshake after Mass. That now happens through Mass online and social media. This communication cannot be devalued, for this communication has real depth when one appreciates spiritual communion. In this way, Church is pursuing greater communion. The pandemic has identified how existing communication structure and channels are inadequate in serving the good of the community in its mission. With the onslaught of the pandemic, communication is appreciated as more than a tool for messaging. It is needed for nourishing a community's life. No longer could the community solely depend on people coming to church

and attending worship. The pandemic has opened the Church up to developing new patterns of communication, to coming together in new ways, and to appreciating the richness of communion.

A resource in place before the pandemic was the internet. With the pandemic, this internet assumed its place as a key resource for the life of the community now living under the restrictions of social distancing. Within its new paradigm, communication through the internet and Sunday worship by YouTube allowed for a new experience of this community. A time of separation showed that we could stay together not just thanks to physical bonds and means. It has showed us what holds us most strongly together is the spiritual dimension.

Spiritual communion may be harder to describe but it was real and effective. We were held together by spiritual bonds. For the first time, I believed in spiritual communion because I experienced the bonds with those not in front of me, but were truly with me in faith and worship. This is a powerful experience that cannot be denied. This is an experience that will have a lasting effect into the new era. If the shared goal is growing into communion for the sake of the gospel, then healthy communication, aiming at and based on communion, assumes its rightful importance as a key to the future.

### **Where is a re-Gathering Faith Community Heading in a post-Pandemic World?**

In his already quoted 1964 essay, Thomas Merton continued:

It would seem more realistic ... to face courageously the challenges of an unknown future in which the Christian can find security not, perhaps, in the lasting strength of familiar human structures but certainly in the promises of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. After all, Christian hope itself would be meaningless if there were no risks to face and if the future were definitively mortgaged to an unchanging present. (Quoted by Horan 2021)

This reflection remains true today as the Church responds to ongoing suffering and tackles an unknown future. Known structures and systems provide us with false security that is too easy to follow but where to? The same old paths to the same old destinations? Mystery has been the word coming to

me so often throughout the pandemic. Do not lose its import. We are mystery. Church is mystery. We and Church are so much more than we could ever imagine as God is so intimately one with us. So let the mystery be and let it direct our way. So we will live the gospel in recognizable ways in a real world. This is the challenge facing Church in a world profoundly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. One small faith community can be a building block that serves as part of the foundation to allow this new Church to arise.

If there is any fear worth naming it would be the fear of Church becoming disconnected. Despite all that social media and technology have to offer us, our personal and social communications could lessen and community could be subjected to a shared life lacking substance. However, this is less likely to happen thanks to a pandemic that has allowed us to appreciate the spiritual and to find again the beauty of communion, spiritual and physical, that is open to all. This is key to being Church for a truly spiritual communion cannot be broken. That we know through the experience of Church through the darkness of the COVID-19 pandemic and take as its gift into the future. So the Church grows in its mission to preach the gospel and build the Reign of God. This reflects the new era to which Pope Francis alerts us and which awaits us if we take up the mantle.

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# Digitally Mediated Pastoral Ministry during the COVID-19 Pandemic, and Questions for the Future

*John Mishen and Anthony Le Duc, SVD*

## **The Pastoral Context of the Pandemic**

Despite the ever-increasing degree of globalization taking place in the world characterized by intertwining economic systems buttressed by internet technology, it is rare to have a happening to which every section of humanity on all continents of the earth can personally relate. The images of pain and suffering caused by war and famine in one part of the world may be reported to people in another part of the world, and the people who view these images might react with sympathy and compassion for the hapless victims, but ultimately, the events themselves might not affect them very deeply in terms of their daily life. Even the effects of climate change and global warming, which is wreaking havoc on many parts of the world, are yet to be felt or understood by many people, especially those living in wealthy countries more equipped with coping mechanisms to deal with adverse impacts brought about by such changes.

The coronavirus pandemic is an exception to the usual state of affairs because it has managed to turn the entire world upside down with all the disruptions brought upon the global political, social, economic, and religious structures. Arguably at no other time in history has an invisible virus managed to cause equal-opportunity destruction throughout every part of the world to the extent that SARS-CoV-2 which gave us COVID-19 has. It has claimed victims of all socio-political-economic backgrounds regardless of age and gender. Admittedly, a detailed examination of the pandemic reveals that certain

groups are more negatively affected than others, even within the same country or community. However, the reality of the pandemic as played out thus far shows that the virus aims to not discriminate.

Beside the public health and the economic-political aspects of the pandemic, there was also a religious dimension as the chaos and suffering experienced by humanity globally raised multiple questions within certain individuals and communities of religion. Questions range the gamut of whether the pandemic represented divine punishment for human sin or was the consequence of negative human karma, depending on the religious outlook of those who raised the issue. Others asked if the pandemic was merely the result of a mishap or was a sign of some impending apocalypse that humanity needed to take heed. Other age-old questions were also re-articulated to address the situation of the pandemic: Where is God in all of this? Why does evil exist? And if there is God, why could such evil be allowed to exist? Even though these questions have been addressed by countless generations of theologians and philosophers, the context of the pandemic revitalized these preoccupations leading to a myriad of articles, homilies, talks, YouTube videos and even some books dealing with these issues.

While religion played a part in helping people to understand and make sense of the pandemic, religion, in terms of being a social and cultural entity, also counted itself among the victims of the coronavirus. The Catholic Church, one of the largest and oldest institutions in the world, also could not escape the wrath of COVID-19. From the Vatican to rural Asia, churches had to be shut down and normal activities that sustained the life of the church and the worldwide flock had to be cancelled or take on a different form. No matter if it was an annual parish feast or important liturgical occasions such as Easter and Christmas, celebrations of these events took on vastly different forms from what Catholics have known all their lives. In addition, Church leaders and pastors who were expected to be “shepherds living with the smell of the sheep” were asked to stay away from them, especially those who were elderly and sick, and thus more at risk of death due to infection by the coronavirus. However, it was not just the sheep themselves who might die from coming in contact with the shepherds; the shepherds too might die as a result from being too close to their sheep. Indeed, by January 2021, Italy alone lost over 200 hundred priests, many of them were still actively serving their communities at the time of their death (Glatz 2021). This is a tragedy for the Church in Italy, which is already facing a serious draught in terms of vocations.

But the Church has never and cannot recoil in the face of danger, especially when it affects the well-being of the faithful and the entire humanity. The very first sentence in the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (no. 1) declares that “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ,” organized around the Catholic Church. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic is not a time for the Church to renege on this promise, but an opportunity for the Church to respond to the signs of the times with concrete actions with courage, determination, confidence, and trust. Besides, considering the global reality of the pandemic, this sense of solidarity should not be a difficult task for the Church to envision.

While the pandemic was going on, we initiated a book project in which we invited contributions from over 20 pastoral workers from over a dozen countries sharing about their pastoral experiences during the pandemic. These accounts were published in a monograph entitled *Pastoral Creativity Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: Global Experiences* (Logos Publications, 2021). The authors included not only priests but also non-clergy pastoral workers (religious, seminarian, lay). Most of the authors are not professional scholars or writers. However, all were active in pastoral ministry in various capacities in the Church. All had to contend with their ministries being torpedoed by an invisible virus that began in a wet market in one corner of the world, and subsequently spread to every continent on earth – even Antarctica! In the face of the pandemic, the pastoral workers did not panic, feel despair, or start blaming others for what was going on. Rather, they made a pastoral response in the most pragmatic way possible, using resources available to them, may it be human power, money, or technology. The experiences recounted in these essays reflect these pastoral responses.

The essays we received could be roughly divided into three sub-groups. The first group of essays focus on the parish setting and the ministries that each parish attempted to implement in response to the crisis. The second group of essays highlight the education and formation ministry, which includes both catechism teaching and other educational settings such as theology schools and formation houses. The third group of essays primarily depict outreach ministries such as those with the poor, migrants, and other marginalized groups. The pastoral workers carrying out these ministries may do so in context of a parish/diocesan setting or as part of a non-parochial program. While there are some overlapping details among the essays, this fact does not affect our overall

intention, which is to present these experiences around some common themes that could facilitate appreciation and comparison of these stories.

Although not entirely surprising, it was remarkable to see that virtually all of the pastoral workers mentioned the role of information and computer technology (ICT) in the pastoral work during the pandemic. For many of them, ICT was only incorporated into their pastoral work due to circumstances presented by the pandemic and did not play an essential part before the pandemic began. For pastoral activities such as Mass, catechism, conducting meditation sessions, working with the disabled, and so on, these were all activities that were done in person. And while ICT may be a part of the pastoral work as far as being used by pastoral workers for the organizational aspect, the actual activities themselves would be an in-person experience. For example, a pastor might use ICT to search for resources to prepare his homily; the choir director might send the songs to be used in the Mass to choir members via email; and altar servers might send their schedule to one another through Facebook Messenger; however, when the Mass takes place, it would be an in-person event where all are physically gathered in the same space and participating in the same liturgy without having that event also digitally mediated. Nonetheless, in the pandemic, ICT did not just have a role in the organizational task of the Mass but had a role in the actual event itself – serving as the medium through which the Mass could be viewed by the faithful who were forced to be socially distanced from one another.

This scenario did not just apply to the Mass but other liturgical and non-liturgical functions as well. Moreover, other pastoral activities such as catechism and outreach work also had to utilize ICT in an unprecedented way. In this chapter, we will present excerpts of essays written by pastoral workers sharing about how they engaged with ICT in their ministries during the pandemic. The experiences surround important pastoral areas such as Mass, teaching, and outreach ministries. Although pastoral activities in the Church are many, by focusing on these particular areas, we can gain a clearer notion of the kind of role that ICT played during the pandemic. As we reflect on these experiences, we will discover that there are important ramifications of this extensive use of ICT for the post-pandemic pastoral agenda of the Church.

## The Role of ICT in the Experiences of Pastoral Workers

### 1. Online Mass

As difficult as it was to close church doors, especially during important occasions on the liturgical calendar such as Holy Week, Christmas and other important local parish celebrations, the reality of the pandemic forced church leaders around the world to accept the fact that they could not celebrate daily and Sunday Masses as they once did before the crisis. However, parishes and dioceses needed to find ways to continue to provide spiritual nourishment to the faithful. For many, the most practical decision under the circumstances was providing online Mass services so that people could view from the safety in their own homes.

For many parishes and dioceses, the decision was not made hastily, especially because broadcasting Masses was not a familiar experience. Few parishes had the necessary equipment on hand as well as the technological knowhow to produce programs for television or the internet. Things had to be learned gradually, and equipment had to be bought in order to respond more fully to the needs of digital communication. For other pastors who served as foreign missionaries, the prospect of celebrating online Masses presented fears and trepidations about language skills having to preach in an extremely public forum in a language not one's own. For many people, just having to go online to communicate to an invisible audience is already a disconcerting experience. Having to do so in a language where one is not fluent compounds the fear and anxiety.

The following excerpts from pastoral workers demonstrate the challenges to turning to online Mass as a necessary measure to address the spiritual needs of the faithful during the pandemic:

*Fr. Joshy Xavier, SJ & Fr. Lawrence Devin Noronha (India):* Because there was complete lockdown, people were indoors, and many did not know how to use the extra time. So we felt that we had to engage the people and connect them with God. As we reflected on the matter, we realized that most people in the city of Lucknow had internet connection. Most of the mobile service providers gave at least 1 or 2 GB of data with most of the mobile packages. If we did not guide them and feed them with some good content, they will waste this data by watching movies and other entertainment materials

online. At that time, the phone served as the primary way for people to pass the time because they could not go anywhere.

One day, some parishioners told me that some other parishes and organizations were holding live programs for their parishioners and followers on social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. We gave some thoughts to this idea, but we had not experimented previously with online platforms. To produce such programs would be a great challenge for us.

In addition to the lack of knowledge and technological equipment, the lockdown made it not immediately possible for us to create a professional technical team. Many of the television networks were unable to function and had to rebroadcast old programs. However, the thought of doing something immediately haunted us, and we decided to come together and act. Once our minds were made up, God inspired us to venture into it. Even today we feel God's divine accompaniment in this journey.

In the beginning, we simply looked for the things we already had as the shops were not open. We managed to collect a laptop, a mixer, and a webcam. Afterward, we had to explore how to go live on our YouTube channel,<sup>1</sup> which was created on March 29, 2020. We were informed that in order to have live mobile broadcasts, our channel had to have at least 1,000 subscribers. Thus, we put out an announcement calling for people to subscribe, and within a day we managed to achieve our goal of subscribers. This demonstration of responses shows that the people were very eager to receive our service. Indeed, the prime motivation to venture online was to quench the spiritual thirst of the people during the Lenten season. We felt that we needed to accompany the people spiritually and keep them connected with God and one another.

**Fr. Anthony Liew (Malaysia):** In view that not all parishioners could come to SMC our Home for Mass even now that we have started three weekend Masses, we have also started live streaming our Masses publicly through our SMC YouTube channel since September 2020. We believe that online Mass is important so that we may continue to grow together spiritually and support one another as one family of SMC by praying and acting together with the homily and relevant announcements during the Mass. Adding this technological dimension to our parish ministry was challenging because we did not have much knowledge in terms of how to manage it. Yet, I thank God that He has shown us the way by giving us necessary resources including manpower on this project. Although we are still struggling with this new mission, we are encouraged to

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<sup>1</sup> (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4yPADjIgJdGcHtY4nBWeEQ>)

strive as we see the significance of this mission in engaging our parishioners within our SMC family as well as other Catholics outside our sheepfold.

**John Uhal (USA):** Not satisfied with the quality and recorded nature of our ‘substitute’ prayer experiences, by Holy Thursday 2020 one of our more tech savvy faith formation directors invested in a portable camera, powerful laptop, and necessary software and accessories. Combined with my knowledge of our sound systems and liturgy and our collected creative ingenuity, we went live with our first ever livestreamed Mass. Over the previous weeks, I had been growing formation and virus response resources on our website; one of them was the addition of hosting livestreams. With less than 10 people in the entire church on any given occasion, we were able to livestream the entire Triduum and every Sunday Mass of Eastertide. Our online attendance began to grow, and today, we typically have around 1,000 people watching our weekend worship. Using our crude, temporary, and portable setup, we also livestreamed our annual Confirmation, the Archdiocesan Installation of Lectors, several baptisms, and baccalaureate Masses.

**Fr. Napoleon James (Belgium):** New pastoral undertakings and creative initiatives introduced by the Church for re-evangelizing or newly evangelizing Europe have doubled during the pandemic. In my pastoral zone we are advising people to postpone baptisms and marriages. But we stream the Holy Eucharist and take Communion to individuals who request the service. I greatly admire the freedom and readiness of the pastoral caregivers and assistants who enthusiastically accept the new proposals that I present to them, such as making the Masses available online. Although we do not yet have a professional camera, we use the smartphone to film. We film the Mass beforehand and stream it on Sunday morning at 10.30, at our usual Sunday Mass time. Right now, the members of the pastoral administration are planning to buy a professional camera to film the Holy Eucharist in order to enhance the quality of the videos.

**Fr. JB. Tuan Trinh, SVD (Chile):** Celebrating the online Masses was not at all easy for me. I was not especially excited about the prospect of an online liturgy, where I would have to stand alone on the altar, facing and preaching to empty pews. I could not think of a more forlorn experience for a pastor of a church. In addition, as a foreigner still not yet fluent in the local language, I face the challenge of not always being able to express what I would like to say. Normally, this challenge would be faced only in the confine of a kind and

understanding congregation. Now, it would be faced in cyberspace where there were no boundaries as to who would be listening and making judgments on what I was saying. Thus, besides having to deal with an empty church, I faced the added pressure of having to be more careful in what I communicated in the liturgy, especially in the homily.

## **2. Online Learning**

Catholic schools and catechism programs in many countries went from in-person to online during the pandemic. Teaching and learning online was not always easy, and one had to consider the reality that not all teachers were technologically adept in order to quickly adjust to the online teaching format. Many teachers belong to the group called ‘digital immigrants’ and technological gadgets and their usage do not come naturally to them. Regrettable mistakes have been made due to lack of skills in using digital platforms. For example, it was widely reported that a professor in Singapore lectured for two hours only to find out towards the end that the entire time, he was on mute. His students tried to contact him to let him know that he was not audible through Zoom and by phone, but all to no avail (Wilkinson 2021).

Besides teachers not having the necessary skills to handle technological gadgets and navigate internet platforms, there was also the issue of the economic status of the students themselves. In developed countries, access to the internet may be more widespread. Students may have laptops and personal computers that facilitate online learning. On the other hand, not all students had the financial means to afford high-speed internet necessary for such an activity. This was especially the cases in some developing countries where many families were still living in poverty. Admittedly, smart phones that can be used to access the platforms used for online learning are very affordable nowadays. Nevertheless, studying online with a smart phone which has a small screen cannot be as effective as having a laptop or a PC with a bigger screen where the content presented by the lecturer can be seen much more easily. It is also the case that not everyone in the family would his/her own phone to use. In some families, one phone might have to be shared among several members and even between generations. In the daytime, the phone would be used by the children in order to do online learning, while in the evening, the adults would use it for following online Mass and prayer services.

Despite these limitations, for many parishes and Catholic learning institutions around the world, online instruction was necessary if the education program were to continue. In parishes, children needed to have the opportunity to receive their first Confession, first Holy Communion or Confirmation. Engaged couples needed to have marriage preparation in order to go through with their marriage plans. Catholic schools and seminaries needed to go on with their program of studies so that the education of students and seminarians would not be delayed.

Anthony spent much of the second semester of the academic year 2020-2021 teaching the major seminarians on Zoom because Thailand was experiencing its second wave, and places of learning were forced to temporarily close their doors. Even after in-person instruction was allowed, he continued to teach online in order to have the same experience as many teachers around the world. He wanted to see what the advantages and disadvantages of the teaching online were. He also wanted to see how his students would perform despite having to learn online. Having taught online for a few months, Anthony can sympathize with the sentiments of the following pastoral workers who shared their experiences about teaching online:

***Br. Camillo Pornsann Singchai (Thailand):*** In my position as a seminarian in the Bangkok Archdiocese, I was given the responsibility of assisting in the summer catechism program at St. Raphael Catholic Church, Pak Nam, Samut Prakan Province. In addition to myself, the parish pastor had asked two minor seminarians to join with me as the leadership team for the program. After discussing and consulting with one another, we decided that we would choose the second method, which was one-way communication. This was the first time that I had the opportunity to learn about and experience live streaming using the program OBS Studio, which can create a beautiful background, share photos from the computer screen, as well as insert sounds and images in the middle of live streaming in a convenient and quick manner. These technological features helped to make the presentation more effective and interesting for the learner. The presentation was live streamed onto a Private Facebook Group, which we named 'Bridge of Love Online Camp.' This group would be reserved exclusively for those who applied to join and were part of the summer catechism program itself.

Despite the one-way communication, we were able to deal with questions in a real-time manner by having those who wished to raise a question to do so in the comment box below the video. Of course, some delay was inevitable due

to issues with internet speed at times; however, overall, this method allowed for the teaching and learning to have a greater degree of liveliness and fun. In addition, we also provided the students with online quizzes to help evaluate the effectiveness of the learning. As part of the catechism program, we also organized other activities online such as praying the Rosary, Mother of Perpetual Help Novena, the Divine Mercy, and the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday.

In my opinion, although not everyone has equal access to the internet, teaching catechism online in the manner described above can help promote a new and healthy way for children to use cyberspace to meet and connect with one another easily. This method also has the potential to lead the youth towards Christ and Church more closely. What is most important is that the Church must do its best to communicate the Good News to the youth using every means at its disposal.

*Leo-Martin Ocampo (Philippines):* I had to learn to adjust to this new mode of teaching myself. Course plans had to be recalibrated and teachers needed to imagine new ways of delivering standard content. Most definitely, a three-hour continuous lecture – difficult as it is to pull off in the flesh – was out of the question in a virtual context where eyestrain and the so-called ‘Zoom fatigue’ are stark realities. The shift to online learning called for change not only in mode but also in mindset. We had to come up with activities that would be effective, exciting, and doable at the same time, given all the constraints. Creativity was the only viable option. At the same time, interior dispositions like openness, humility and tenacity also proved very important. To borrow the beautiful image proposed by the Lord in the parable, we need new wineskins for new wine. There is always room for growth and updating.

Nonetheless, there were many pleasant surprises that came along the way. At first, learning to deal with various tools for online teaching and learning can be very daunting but I began to enjoy them soon enough. The initial discomfort gave way to a feeling of empowerment as I broke new ground. I learned how to trust in my students more, even when I could not see them and miss the feeling of being in charge and in control. Most of all, I could not help but be profoundly amazed by the creativity and enthusiasm of my students who are thankfully much more proficient than I am in the use of technology. Creativity, after all, is not one-sided. We draw from the creativity that the Spirit inspires in each of us, for as long as we are generous and willing enough to learn.

**Fr. Minh Anh Dinh, SVD (USA):** There are many advantages of online learning, but disadvantages are also inevitable. In the beginning, the children were very excited for getting back to catechism class after a long break. With online format, even though it requires more time to prepare for the weekly session, it allows teachers to connect and share many aiding resources from the internet with our students. We are able to find videos, music, and online Bible stories to show the children. These creative sources are a big help to catch the students' attention. As teachers, we understand that it is much more difficult for students to stay focused on online platform than in a regular class in person. It is nearly impossible for the teachers to know what is on the screens of the children during the lesson. I often check our students' attention by asking them to read or answer questions. This is one of the main reasons why we need the parents' accompaniment in the program, in order to assist the teachers to keep the children's attention during class.

Although the students do not give feedback directly to us about the online learning, we can sense disappointment in them whenever we have to skip some activities that require in-person participation. This is the time when teachers need to be creative and find substitute exercises for them. Yet, from the parents' feedback, we receive many positive reactions, for this is the first time that they are allowed to stay in class and learn together with their children. By being with us, besides their valuable presence, the parents can also suggest many creative and valuable ideas to the class. This is truly a gift to have the parents in the classroom with the catechists. For example, parents suggested to help us to facilitate those activities and games that require in-person participation at home. They also invite other members in the family, like grandparents, siblings and relatives who live in the same house to participate with them. This not only makes the at-home-lessons more enjoyable and livelier for our children, but also creates strong bonds among the family members.

I have taught catechesis for five years now, and my colleagues would agree with me that this is the first time that we are able to include parents this much in the faith formation of their children. For me, this is truly the wondrous grace of God amidst the pandemic. In many ways, the parents are invited to actively take on a prophetic role as a witness to their children's faith.

**Br. James Phillip M. Monserate, OHF (Philippines):** In the midst of this unfamiliar experience of learning, relating, and teaching virtually, I found myself exhausted and patently tired, as if things become less attractive, instead, mechanical, inanimate, and empty. The excitement in me, the enthusiasm, the

joy, and the eagerness seemed to be on constant decline. The ‘rainbow’ that I wished to see seemed to be so dull.

Nonetheless, as I looked at my students sharing things about their experience at home, sharing their frustrations with some of their professors, and their struggle with their internet connectivity, as I listened to the students who were still eager to learn while spending fourteen days at the quarantine facilities, something prompted me to recall who I was in them, the ‘I’ and the ‘thou’ that led to the ‘we’ and the subject that I was handling which should rather give them hope and anticipation for it spoke of something metaphysical, divine and powerful. It spoke of God. There I realized that in this kind of situation, I was more than a teacher, a professor, or a mentor to them... that I should be a ‘friend,’ like the ‘person’ of Jesus who I was sharing about in my theology class.

### **3. Online Outreach Ministries**

Pastoral work in the Church has always emphasized outreach activities – to the poor, the sick, the disabled, the marginalized, the oppressed and the neglected. During the pandemic, despite physical church structures being prevented from opening their doors, and social distancing was enforced on a large-scale basis, these pastoral needs did not go away. In many ways, the reality of the pandemic caused more people to need assistance due to loss of jobs, social and emotional isolation, and depression, etc. One could say that the multiple challenges of the pandemic presented an opportunity for the Church to truly live out its mission as the Sacrament of Christ, making God present to the people who were suffering and questioned whether God was punishing them and the world for sins. There was perhaps no other time in recent memory where the Church needed to rise beyond fear, anxiety, self-pity, and self-protectionism in order to overcome the monumental challenges to pastoring the faithful and the global humanity. The pandemic was as much a crisis for the Church as an opportunity to live out its true calling in the world.

The following excerpts by pastoral workers indicate that they continued to find ways to reach out to those who they had served during the pandemic despite the many limitations confronting them. Some pastoral workers shared about how certain needs arose from the pandemic and had to be responded to with new pastoral efforts. All these experiences indicate that ICT had a significant role in their outreach working during the crisis. ICT not only helped

to sustain ongoing pastoral work but helped to implement new initiatives related to the pandemic.

**Fr. Shiju Paul, SVD (USA):** The residents and staff of the HIV center requested that I continue offering them the guided meditations as a support for living through the difficult times further aggravated by the pandemic. Prior to the end of March 2020, the sessions were conducted in-person at the center; however, the present circumstance has forced these sessions to go online, with Zoom serving as the platform. I mostly use guided mindfulness and compassion meditation practices with the group. It deepens our sense of being in connection in the universe, with others and with ourselves in a loving way in order to become the fully realized persons we are meant to be. I call this fully realized state as our Christ Consciousness experienced in the present moment as connection and communion. Meditation practice consists of a variety of techniques and paths that assist a person in undergoing a life-transforming process when dealing with uncertainties. It includes Check-ins, Meditation Process, Personal Sharing and if need be, use of Ritual. Meditation practices employ integral tools such as breathing, body scan, energy centers, focused relaxation, mantra repetition etc., for recognizing and integrating ongoing pandemic related thoughts, feelings, sensations, and behaviors. In this time of pandemic, the loop of ruminative thinking driven by fear, anger and sadness perpetuate the emotions of anxiety and stress. I offer this program as a prayer ministry with a people who sense a great sense of vulnerability and a whirlpool of challenging emotions. This helps them in their capacity for response-ability to ever changing situations rather than to react in fear to overwhelming scenarios of the pandemic.

**Joseph Richard Quane (USA):** Some of our friends with disabilities living at home with their parents have been able to participate in a few virtual gatherings during the pandemic. During the pandemic we have gathered online every 4-6 weeks to check-in with the friends with disabilities who have the ability to join us virtually. Each meeting had a different theme. For example, over the summer we meet for an ice cream social. All the catechists and friends gathered virtually to eat ice cream together and talk about the rather odd summer. We all spoke about our favorite ice cream flavors and sang different songs. We mostly just enjoyed the time together. While some of our friends managed to remain at the gathering for 45 minutes, a couple of our friends lost interest after a few minutes. Even though they were only able to manage for a few minutes, it was

evident to me that they were happy to see the other members of the group and hear their voices. Many of our friends struggled with the distractions in their home; some found it difficult to focus on the screen, and others seemed to suffer from ‘Zoom fatigue.’ During one of our gatherings, one of our friends with disabilities appeared to have no interest in joining our Zoom gathering until she saw a glimpse of some members of the group. At the beginning of our gathering, she kept pushing away the tablet when her mom was encouraging her to offer a greeting to the group. While her mom was speaking to the group, she caught a glimpse of some of the members of the group on the screen and was filled with delight. She quickly grabbed hold of the tablet and began to wave to everyone. For the next ten minutes she stared at the tablet with a smile on her face. It was evident to me that she felt a special connection to the group and a sense of belonging in our virtual gathering.

***Maria Tien Phan (Thailand):*** Because of the increasing fear and anxiety among Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand, there was a need for regular, up-to-date, and pertinent information to help Vietnamese migrants understand the situation in order to allay fear, eliminate the spread of rumors and misinformation, and to provide basic consultation to people who may have questions such as where to get COVID-19 tests and what the cost of treatment for foreigners might be. For many Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand, their grasp of Thai language, especially formal Thai is limited and could not always follow the situation closely and accurately. They often have to depend on news from other individuals in the community who are more informed for information. Unfortunately, such information, usually transmitted via Facebook is not always accurately, and can cause unnecessary panic and stress to the people who come across it. It must be noted that although many Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand have some command of the Thai language in order to work, this limited fluency prevents them from understanding adequately about the overall crisis.

It was in this situation that I was approached by a priest from the Pastoral Committee for Vietnamese Migrants under the auspices of the Bishops Conference of Thailand to create a Facebook COVID-19 ‘hotline’ and information page in order to post useful information about the COVID-19 pandemic to serve the Vietnamese migrant community. I was not only asked to create the page, but also to serve as its administrator and to answer questions that might come from the people who follow the page. When I heard the request, I felt that this was a difficult task to take on, and I was uncertain if I

wanted to accept something as serious as what I was being asked to do. Although it was not difficult to translate relevant news from Thai media into Vietnamese then post onto the page, the task of answering questions that might concern all sorts of matters coming from various people would be a formidable one. Nevertheless, understanding the urgent need presented by the present circumstances, I agreed to take on the challenge.

Having created the page and serving as its administrator for several months, I have become increasingly more adept at the work. I have learned to understand people's questions which are presented to me in all sorts of manners. I have learned to be patient with people who ask questions that are beyond my immediate responsibility, giving answers where I am able to.

*Sr. Shen Shuangying (China):* In order to mitigate the problems brought about by the crisis, an online group named 'Spiritual Integration for Charity in Special Time' was created in order to provide support for Christian families. This group took advantage of all possible resources. For example, group members who were in the teaching profession volunteered their time to help those children who needed help in their studies. This support was a big help to those parents who were not capable to help their children in completing homework assignments. In addition, all members of this group underwent studies on how to improve husband-and-wife relationship, family life and parent-and-children relations, etc. By exercising the 'Five Ways of Love' which are the possible ways discussed and provided in the workshop, many couples have deepened their love for one another and found more things in common. Moreover, they have learned how to create a loving and healthy family atmosphere for their children.

It is true that our Church is one family. It is amazing to see that young Catholics, especially women, are active in online groups. It is really like a big family union. They could exchange their own experience of raising up children, reflections on the Word of God, having service at church and how to improve relationship with other family members. Despite all the inconvenience caused by the epidemic, Catholics from northern China found their way to reach God and others. Nothing could hinder us from helping one another. It has added a new dimension to our present pastoral work in the parish. Even in difficult times, our pastoral work has to reach those in need in all possible ways. In God, there is always a way.

**Fr. Dominic Thuan Nguyen (Japan):** According to the newspaper *Japan Times* (October 9, 2020), the number of suicides in August dramatically increased. A rather worrisome fact is that among the people who took their lives were many women and school-age people. It was surmised that this phenomenon was due to the psychological stress caused by COVID-19. The fact that while there were only 2,000 deaths due to COVID-19, there were 13,000 suicides which were extremely disturbing to government leaders and social experts (Tomisawa and Katanuma 2020). The feeling of having no way out had become a serious effect brought about by the pandemic.

In the face of this reality, our parish decided to establish a hotline where people could call to ask for advice or just to have someone listen to their problems. The people who receive the phone calls are volunteers that come from the parish community. In addition to establishing the hotline, our parish is also using the parish website to communicate useful information about the pandemic and publish content that would provide spiritual as well as emotional support for the community and those who happen to come to our site.

Despite being limited in personnel as well as funds, our parish has managed to carry out activities that help to mitigate the pain and suffering of some people. These activities at the same time affirm the true nature and mission of the Church, which is for the people....

With a combination of hardware (computers, mobile phones, tablets, iPods) and software (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Zalo, Viber), the Church has continued to communicate not only about God and about itself, but also walk with, listen to, and meet everyone. Especially during a pandemic when people have to confront loneliness and isolation, the use of digital technology proves to be the safest and the best solution for interpersonal communication and other forms of exchanges that would not drive up the infection curve. In addition, when pastoral workers resort to modern digital communication technology, they not only prevent self-isolation and detachment from the happenings of the world, but they can also become more keenly aware of the events taking place. More importantly, the presence of the pastoral worker in these virtual spaces and social networks can help to transform what is 'virtual' to become 'real' and what is 'false' to become 'truth.' This is all the more necessary in the face of the tremendous amount of disinformation and misinformation on internet forums that would benefit from the injection of the Good News. Ultimately, the pastoral worker aims in every action to mitigate the pain and suffering faced by humanity.

## Summary and Discussion

The real-world experiences presented in this chapter demonstrates that ICT's role during the pandemic was extremely significant. From the experience of pastoral work in general and in relationship to ICT in particular, a number of salient points could be made as follows:

*1. Pastoral agents of all capacities are 'essential workers' in the Church.* The COVID-19 pandemic was an event that needed to involve every type of pastoral agent – ordained and lay, men and women. All had some role that they could play to continue the mission of the Church and to respond to new pastoral needs arising from this global calamity. The experiences recounted above demonstrate that in order to sustain the life of the Church during the pandemic, the different segments of the Church had to continue to take their part. All were 'essential workers' in their various capacities. And each person had to figure out how to play their part in the life of the Church in the face of particularly challenging circumstances.

Priests had to get used to speak to a camera and empty pews in order to communicate God's love and mercy to the faithful being scattered by the pandemic. Catechists had to take their lessons online. Lay ministers became volunteers for hotlines and websites in order to provide information support to people seeking help. But their roles as essential workers in the Church never ceased. They simply had to figure out an alternative way to do what they had been doing previously all for the sake of building up the Body of Christ, which was being put under tremendous duress due to a global pandemic. John Uhal reflected this individual and collective effort in his essay: "I credit our generally positive response to a dedicated and creative paid and volunteer staff, an exceptional pastor, and a parishioner base willing to make and experience changes."

Vo Cong Dung, a layman in his 30s affirmed in his essay in the book, "I have a deep conviction that I have also been called to be an instrument of God's mercy through the small things that I am able to do to help alleviate the pain and suffering of others." Indeed, what is noteworthy in reading about their experiences is that they do not offer simple or cheap theological solutions to the reason for the pandemic. They do not speak of it as God's will, or God's punishment, and neither do they suggest that more prayer or the right kind of prayer could lure God into bringing the pandemic to an end. Rather, they have

simply gotten to work. And when the reality of the pandemic made in-person work not possible, they turned to ICT and did their best.

2. *Virtual spaces are real.* We cannot deny this reality when everywhere around the world, Church pastoral leaders and workers resorted to digital spaces in order to connect with their flock, to teach catechism, to provide counselling, to give blessings. Relationships were sustained, spiritual lives were nourished, and ecclesial communion did not disappear because of physical churches being shut down and in-person gatherings had to be severely curtailed. On the digital spaces made available by social media platforms and other information and communication technology, people congregated to pray together, to share their stories, and to receive comfort from one another.

Virtual spaces are real because they facilitate human interaction and make concrete impact on our emotional, spiritual, and social lives. Indeed, they are real because they have become an inextricable part of contemporary society and extremely significant part of the COVID-19 pandemic experience of pastoral leaders and workers around the world. To negate or deny the authenticity and the ‘realness’ of virtual spaces is also to reject the integrity and value of the impact that the pastoral leaders and workers made in their pastoral outreach efforts.

3. *Creativity is born of necessity.* The adage that ‘necessity is the mother of invention’ has once again been on display during the pandemic. As a result of lockdowns, social distancing measures, and whole host of other restrictions on normal routines, pastoral agents had to resort to various means to carry out their pastoral work. But they did not do so simply relying on their own ingenuity. Fr. James McTavish (Philippines) commented that they collaborated with the Holy Spirit to squeeze out a creative pastoral response amid what was obviously not an easy situation.

Some managed to come up with new pastoral outreach programs in order to specifically respond to the needs arising from the pandemic. Many had to learn new skills and found ways to be resourceful. Catechists whose students were homebound due to the pandemic enlisted the help of parents so that the learning experience of the children would be more effective (Minh Dinh). Some like Fr. Tuan Trinh (Chile) had to take risks, celebrating online Mass in Spanish even though he was not yet fluent in the language. New online activities (Bible competition, Scripture translation projects, Guess the part of the church

competition, etc.) were invented in order to engage the people at home and physically separated from one another.

The pastoral agents in these essays have all either directly or indirectly affirm Fr. Shiju Paul's exhortation to "not resist stubbornly the new awakenings and invitations of the creative spirit swaying in the wind in the time of pandemic" in order to break away from pastoral security, stagnant ways of being Church, and outdated ways of bringing Christ to others. The pandemic was as much a crisis as it was an opportunity for pastoral explorations, ingenuity, and courage in testing new grounds, trying new ministerial models and employing new means of communication. With various levels of success, the pastoral agents in this book have ventured into new pastoral territories and methods. The point is not so much that they were successful or not, but that they tried.

4. *God is always with us.* Whether through the activities of the Church or through individual prayers and contemplation, the pandemic affirmed that God did not cease to be with God's people. Through the priest who celebrated Mass online for people to participate from the safety of their homes; through volunteers who manned telephone hotlines to counsel people in distress or administer websites providing helpful pandemic information for migrant workers; through meditation sessions via Zoom to help people find God deep within themselves; and through so many other different ways that pastoral leaders and workers communicated with God's people, it was confirmation that God did not abandon the world during the pandemic.

As Joseph Quane affirmed in his essay, "During the moment when I get to see our friends [with intellectual and development disabilities] react to seeing the group on Zoom or outside the window of their home, I am reminded that God is indeed with us. When I see the smile on their face and hear the excitement in their voices, I know that our bonds of friendship remain strong, and it is through those bonds of friendships that we can grow in our relationship with God." God is also with us in the suffering because God not only is willing to suffer on account of humanity, but God also accompanies creation in its own suffering. Indeed, God suffers with the whole of creation, even with the coronavirus as we humans try to eliminate it. God accompanies creation in its suffering, and in this way, by God's loving presence, redeems it. Similarly, the African Conference of Churches affirms:

Our theology must take seriously the fact that even with COVID-19, even when many people die and some are healed, the presence of

Emmanuel, God with us, is assured. We may rather be praying for God's grace, to be able to "drink from the cup" if necessary without losing our faith. Even in death, we have a promise of resurrection, since: "When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." (1 Cor. 15:54)<sup>2</sup>

5. *Need for deeper examination of theological implications of pastoral practices carried out during the pandemic for the post-pandemic Church.* The pastoral work of the Church did not stop just because there was a pandemic raging in many countries in various waves. The fact that pastoral workers had to resort to ICT in a significant manner also raises questions about the theological and spiritual implications of these pastoral actions. As tech experts have observed, people's online habits picked up during the pandemic may not easily be discarded even after the pandemic has passed. One may even argue that the world will never go back to the way it was before the pandemic. There will be a 'new normal,' even though we might not always be sure what it will look like. Facing this reality of having resorted to new modes of pastoral actions in order to deal with the situation of the pandemic, issues that need to be examined further for a deeper understanding of this new milieu include:

- *What is the nature and the value of the 'presence' exercised by pastoral leaders in the online environment, either in a liturgical setting or other non-liturgical activities such as a Bible class or a spiritual talk?*
- *How should Church leaders respond to the ever-increasing number of requests for online confession, especially by people who live in situations/countries where they do not have access to priests, in a way that takes into serious account the ever-greater development of digital technology used for human inter-connection?*
- *How can ICT mediated pastoral care be developed and implemented and still maintain fidelity to the incarnational theological framework that is essential to the Christian pastoral theology?*

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<sup>2</sup> Ten Theological Theses on COVID-19 in Africa - All Africa Conference of Churches derived from [https://www.globalministries.org/ten\\_theological\\_theses\\_on\\_covid\\_19\\_in\\_africa](https://www.globalministries.org/ten_theological_theses_on_covid_19_in_africa),

- *With the seemingly limitless nature of digital technology and so many pastoral opportunities online and offline, how can pastoral leaders decipher the appropriate boundaries between domains that warrant proper pastoral action and those considered beyond the pastoral purview?*
- *What are the standards to judge between pastoral/missionary creativity (as called for by Pope Francis) and potentially destructive pastoral innovations in the digital milieu?*
- *How can ICT be used as an effective means in the building of a synodal Church, in which all members of the People of God are able to listen to each other, learn from each other, and collaborate with each other in the task of evangelization?*
- *How can ICT become a beneficial tool for Church leaders and pastoral agents to listen to the thoughts and aspirations of various groups in the Church, especially the youth and marginalized groups, in order to discern the sensus fidelium of the People of God in the digital age?*

In an interview with the magazine *Tablet*, Pope Francis said, “I’m thinking of my responsibilities now, and what will come afterwards. What will be my service as Bishop of Rome, as head of the Church, in the aftermath? That aftermath has already begun to be revealed as tragic and painful, which is why we must be thinking about it now” (Ivereigh 2020). Indeed, during the pandemic, pastoral workers did their best to sustain the life of the Church. ICT had a significant role to play in this effort. However, as we look forward to the post-pandemic church, it is important to examine how ICT was and being used, to ask the relevant questions about this usage, and to have meaningful directions for the incorporation of ICT in the pastoral work of the Church at all levels in the future – with or without the pandemic.

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# New Approaches to Vietnamese Catholic Hospital Ministry in the post-Pandemic Time

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been affecting the lives and health of people around the world to the extent of causing millions of deaths (Pham 2020). In face of such impacts, every institution, organization, and individual must find ways to deal effectively with the pandemic while endeavoring to care for those affected by COVID-19. Confronted with the immense suffering of countless Catholics and non-Catholics alike, the Catholic Church in particular sees as her urgent mission the accompaniment by Catholic healthcare workers and chaplains to the patients and their families in the hours of need. Therefore, besides offering prayers for the quick termination of the pandemic, the Church has ceaselessly been providing pastoral presence in the common fight against the virus. Throughout the world, the Church has called on people of goodwill to stand together in preventing the spread of COVID-19 as well as to join in the efforts of serving and caring for patients and their family members. This chapter thus will present the role and the importance of pastoral care by the Church in helping patients and their family members to cope with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In so doing, it undertakes the task of outlining new approaches to Catholic hospital chaplaincy in the Vietnamese context going forward, especially regarding the innovative employment of social media in patient pastoral care.

### Pastoral Care by the Church

The Catholic faith teaches charity and compassion in encouraging everyone to recognize Christ in the suffering and dying person. Whenever one sees a suffering person, one encounters Christ in that person; whenever one cares for a patient, one cares for the Lord Jesus Christ present in that person; and whenever one does something for a suffering person, one does it for the Lord God Himself (Matt. 25: 40). Responding to the call to charity of the Lord Jesus Christ, members of the Church always try their best in providing care to the patients, especially those who are in their last moments on earth. Even in the case of patients infected with COVID-19, the Church is committed to affirming her pastoral presence to them. The Holy Mother Church considers this pastoral service to be among the most important duties in her mission of caring for the well-being of her children. In most critical moments and under the gravest situations, the Catholic Church stands ready to administer the Holy Sacraments and to accompany patients in need. For countries with religious freedom, the Church even builds hospitals and medical facilities to provide patients with the best and most efficient, compassionate care.

In his letter, Saint James the Apostle has the following to say about the pastoral role of the Church in relation to the sick and the dying: “Is one of you sick? Let him send for the presbyters of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the Lord’s name. Prayer offered in faith will restore the sick man, and the Lord will give him relief; if he is guilty of sins, they will be pardoned” (5: 14-15). For those patients facing serious illness, the Church is thus always willing to administer ‘the last rite’ so they may be able to reconcile themselves with God, with others and with themselves. When the priest anoints the patient’s forehead with holy oil and prays over him or her, the patient is forgiven of his or her sins; even the patient’s apparent physical pains can be lessened due to the presence of believing souls praying for him or her as well as by the spiritual effects of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. As *the Catechism of the Catholic Church* states:

The first grace of this sacrament is one of strengthening, peace and courage to overcome the difficulties that go with the condition of serious illness or the frailty of old age. This grace is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who renews trust and faith in God and strengthens against the temptations of the evil one, the temptation to discouragement and anguish in the face of death. This assistance from the Lord by the

power of his Spirit is meant to lead the sick person to healing of the soul, but also of the body if such is God's will. Furthermore, if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. (No. 1520)

Indeed, the Lord Jesus is the physician for the soul and the body of every believing Christian. He shows His mercy and care to everyone, especially to patients and those who are suffering either in mind, body, or spirit. He has the power to cure all forms of illness by virtue of His love and bestowal of the Holy Spirit to the suffering and dying patients in their hours of need. Therefore, the Christian faithful are urged to contact a priest so as to provide the patient in need with proper pastoral care when his or her life seems to be at stake.

Aside from providing the Holy Sacraments, the Church is also prepared to be present and accompany patients as they undergo medical treatments. Presence here, according to Charles Lopez, consists of attention, accompaniment, care, conversations, words of encouragement, and joint prayers so that patients do not feel lonely and afraid of their illness. Indeed, spiritual presence for suffering patients is very important, since medical care is usually understood as taking care of bodily or physical ailments, but care from the chaplain is about the salvation of the soul of the patient in question. Specifically, Lopez has written in his book as follows:

The heart of spiritual care for the hospice chaplain is presence, some say, empathetic presence, the exact opposite of "fixing it." Empathetic presence helps people feel heard and not alone. When patients and families are experiencing losses, despair, questions about the meaning of suffering, or a sense of abandonment by the divine, more than anything else they need to be heard and know they are not alone. (2018, 46)

Undoubtedly, the role of hospital chaplains in patient care is indispensable to the progress of treatment and recovery of the patients. These chaplains might be priests, clergymen, pastors, or individuals trained in pastoral theology and psychology, equipped with proper listening and pastoral skills for accompanying the patients and their families in times of illness. When spending time with patients and their families, chaplains thus must take care to fully employ the art of listening. Listening is not an easy task; yet chaplains must devote a significant amount of time to accompanying those under their care by listening attentively

to what patients and their families have to say so as to give an authentic witness to God's love to everyone involved.

To this end, chaplains should carry positive attitudes, hopeful outlooks, and cheerful dispositions in order to readily voice words of encouragement and supportiveness to the patients placed under their care. Through caring for the suffering patients and the dying with a benevolent spirit, the Church is incessantly executing Jesus' mission of healing and curing diseases. The Church not only carries out this mission for Church members but also extends her loving arms to anyone without prejudice. In the past two years, many brave examples of 'white-coat heroes' along with selfless volunteers have surfaced as exemplary witnesses to God's love. They are present all over the world; they are not only doctors and nurses but also clergymen. They are pioneers in the efforts of dealing with the tragic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. They were unflinching before hardships and perils as they put themselves at the forefront of providing care to COVID-19 patients.

### **Challenges Facing Chaplains during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Indeed, the role of hospital chaplains cannot be emphasized enough in terms of its overall impact on the treatment and recovery of COVID-19 patients. Hospital chaplains provide encouragement, consolation, compassionate care, and spiritual guidance not only to patients but also to doctors, nurses, healthcare professionals and workers. Having accessible and available chaplains, patients are affirmed in their faith and comforted in their fears. With the accompaniment of chaplains, members of the medical staff can be strengthened in their resolve and perseverance to provide COVID-19 patients the best care that they deserve. With the presence of chaplains, people working in the healthcare settings can lift his or her spirit beyond the mundane routines or a tenuous moment caused by stress and pressure.

However, the reality on the ground has shown a challenging situation particularly for hospital chaplains whereby they were by and large excluded from providing care to affected COVID-19 patients and their families due to the contagious nature of the virus and thus quarantine and social distancing. Care has thus focused primarily on the physical health of the patients while their pastoral and spiritual care needs were confined to the 'virtual' reality if not neglected altogether. As far as the COVID-19 pandemic is concerned, patients were usually quarantined and only allowed to receive direct care from doctors

and medical staff. To prevent the spread of the virus, “hospitals have instituted the policy of prohibiting nonessential visits of anyone except for the medical personnel” (Pham 2021). This policy has prevented family members from visiting or having direct interaction with their loved ones, much less chaplains or pastoral care givers, which are categorized as ‘nonessential’ under the purview of this policy.

Certainly, the Church never yields in the face of difficulty. Many chaplains and priests have been able to find new ways for maintaining contact with the Christian faithful, especially those who are infected with COVID-19 or who are undergoing quarantine and receiving medical treatment for their COVID-19 related illness. Through these innovative ways, COVID-19 patients are still accompanied by the praying Christian faithful, pastoral care is still provided ‘virtually,’ and the Holy Sacraments are still administered to those in need. As a result, the Church is able to give effective witness to the abiding presence of God to suffering and dying individuals. God is not only present to the patients and their loved ones in the Sacraments and in the praying spirit of Christians everywhere, God is suffering alongside them also! Therefore, the Church does not want any of her faithful children to feel alienated from God even in the midst of social distancing, physical isolation, and being surrounded by fears.

Amid the social, economic, and medical crises caused by the pandemic, the Lord God still beckons us to love, care, and accompany others, especially the COVID-19 patients and the dying individuals. Therefore, at a Mass celebrated in the Chapel of Saint Marta in Rome, Pope Francis called on believers to pray for priests so that they would be equipped with the courage to visit patients. He said, “Let us also pray to the Lord for our priests, so that they have the courage to go out and go to those who are sick, bringing the strength of the word of God and the Eucharist and to accompany health care workers and volunteers in the work they are doing” (Glatz 2020). The Holy Father fully understood the dangers caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to the healthcare workers and pastoral care givers.

Undoubtedly, the priests also stand the chance of getting themselves infected with the virus, so they must be extremely careful and take all the necessary preventive measures to keep themselves physically healthy. However, maintaining social distance from one another and abstaining from having close physical contact should not stand in the way of preserving a close human-to-human relationship between patients and pastoral care givers. Care and encouragement for one another should never cease in the face of the contagious nature of COVID-19. Hence, Pope Francis exhorted the Christian faithful to

maintain their support for the medical staff, the priests, the pastoral care givers, and the patients by means of incessantly offering prayers and intercessions throughout the time of the pandemic. It was an urgent call from the Pope to anyone who harbored desires for allowing God's love to remain burning brightly in his or her heart.

When the COVID-19 pandemic first started, priests were not allowed to visit and provide the Holy Sacraments to the patients at hospitals and medical facilities. Thus, patients having COVID-19 were unable to receive much needed pastoral care. Even when they passed away, no priest could come near their caskets to offer prayers or perform the last rites. Fortunately, priests were eventually allowed to provide pastoral presence to dying patients and those infected with COVID-19 on the condition that they would adhere strictly to the safety measures aimed at preventing the further spread of the virus (i.e., wearing protective clothing, keeping a safe distance from the affected patients, sanitizing their hands, etc.) (Spiritual Care Association 2020). This change brought much encouragement and consolation to the grieving family members of those who were suffering and dying from COVID-19.

Even though many priests did not have much experience in handling the medical restrictions imposed by the pandemic and were totally new to the reality of providing pastoral care amidst the dangers of COVID-19 infection, their pastoral instinct of 'remaining with the flock and not running away' remained intact and alive. They felt they had to be present, if not physically then spiritually, for their brothers and sisters. Courage was thus key to accomplishing their mission of providing pastoral care to the flock entrusted to them. In this sense, they were aided tremendously by technological innovations available to them and continued to serve the members of the Christian faithful with zeal and creativity.

### **Creativity of Hospital Chaplaincy in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

In the face of many hardships and obstacles to their ministry outreach due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, many priests have been making creative use of the social media to maintain pastoral contact with their parishioners and patients. Followed are some of the most innovative approaches to making pastoral ministry in hospital settings more efficient and responsive to the challenges of the future (Spiritual Care Association 2020):

First, professional training for chaplains has been updated with information about the pathological spread of contagious diseases like COVID-19 in order to allow those engaged in hospital chaplaincy to make informed decisions about their safety as well as that of the patients. To this extent, an updated theological perspective on sin and punishment, the theological relationship between God's wrath and human suffering, an uplifting outlook centered on God's love and compassion has been included in training material for chaplains.

In a hectic environment that is descriptive of the hospital settings, hospital chaplaincy provides a grounded foundation not only to patients but also to everyone involved in the care of the sick and the dying, such as doctors, nurses, healthcare professionals and workers. In this sense, chaplains serve as witnesses to hope by lifting people's spirit beyond their mortal fears, despair, or gloomy outlooks through words of affirmation, encouragement, prayer, and blessings.

Interestingly, social media and technology have made possible the 'virtual interactions' among chaplains, pastoral care givers and those whom they provide pastoral presence. The online pastoral interactions have lessened the need for protective medical equipment and thus provided for a better prioritizing of much needed medical resources in the time of crisis. In the case when the physical interaction between the chaplain and the patient is required such as the administration of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick or the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the hospital's guideline for preventing the spread of the virus must be strictly adhered to in order to ensure health and well-being of everyone involved.

For hospitals and medical facilities equipped with advanced communications systems, chaplains can still meet with the majority of their patients through the camera, smartphone, or iPad. These technological means greatly help expand the scope of the 'visits' by the chaplains beyond the usual visiting hours under normal circumstances. As many chaplains have shared about their experiences of providing pastoral care to patients during the COVID-19 pandemic, patients very much enjoyed the 'virtual' visits of the chaplains and looked forward to 'meeting' them through the digital screens. Their needs for verbal support, spiritual encouragement and blessing remained as high as ever. Such visits featured short prayers, Scriptural readings, uplifting stories that were tailored to meet the time limitations of the patients' schedules. The 'virtual' pastoral presence was indeed instrumental to helping the patients overcome their fears and anxieties, experience the presence of God and place complete trust in His healing grace.

Usually, hospitals can support the chaplains by informing them about patients and family members needing pastoral care or pastoral attention. This cooperation between the medical and pastoral care within a hospital helps facilitate a balanced approach to accompanying the patients on their road to recovery. The phone calls, the moments of prayer and imparting blessings upon the patients by the chaplains can be accompanied by the nurses and the medical staff.

Notably, during the pandemic, priests were not allowed to celebrate Masses in the chapels of hospitals or nursing homes. However, patients were still in 'virtual communion' with the Christian community at large with the daily Masses being broadcast or live streamed in almost all dioceses throughout the world. Many chaplains have shared that they were able to maintain an intimate connection with their patients during the pandemic thanks to this approach at 'virtual communion' (Neuhaus 2020). For their part, patients were able to feel the divine presence of God as well as the supporting spirit of the Church. Interestingly, many priests noted the number of parishioners attending virtual Masses to be higher than the number of attendees before the pandemic.

Importantly, requiem Masses and prayers for the deceased can still be offered under the special circumstances created by the pandemic. These sacramental services can be carried out with live streaming to virtually connect all family members, relatives, and friends of the deceased with the Church at large. Such an innovative approach to pastoral care points the participants to the reality of spiritual communion that ultimately connects everyone to each other and to God, an aspect of the Christian faith that is often overlooked under normal circumstances. However, many Catholic patients did not get to receive the Last Rites before they passed away throughout the pandemic (Spiritual Care Association 2020). Social distancing and quarantines also made it impossible for all family members, loved ones, friends and the community to gather in person to celebrate the Christian Mass of burial in memory of the deceased.

Indeed, the care of COVID-19 patients has been an indispensable contribution of the chaplains and pastoral caregiver aside from the obvious role of the doctors, nurses, healthcare professionals and workers. This fact speaks volumes about the necessity for everyone in society to stand together if the COVID-19 pandemic and its ongoing and long-term impacts are to be dealt with successfully.

## Hospital Chaplaincy in Vietnam during the COVID-19 Crisis

In the beginning of the pandemic, when COVID-19 was rapidly spreading all over the world, Vietnam was very successful in fighting the epidemic with strict policies in place. Despite sharing a long land border with China, which is believed to be the source of COVID-19, Vietnam was initially successful in its efforts and praised by the global community, even called a good model for many countries to learn. However, according to many analyses, the pandemic surged in Vietnam due to a combination of reasons including: the Vietnamese government being too zealous about winning COVID-19 in previous outbreaks; the appearance of more dangerous and contagious variants; and the overconfidence of the Vietnamese people in dealing with the crisis (Vo 2021).

Thus, in the middle of 2021, anxiety, suffering and fear of death were everywhere throughout Vietnam, especially in Sai Gon, as the country faced the dramatic attack of the COVID-19 pandemic. In his letter to all Vietnamese Catholics, issued on September 07, 2022, Archbishop Joseph Nguyen Chi Linh, wrote: “Never, even during the war, has the city [Sai Gon] experienced such pressing challenges as it does today. Many tragedies are taking place more and more seriously: community infections, hospitals are overloaded, doctors, medical staff are exhausted” (2021). Having witnessed this situation, Fr. Peter Hoang Van Loan (2022), a priest in the Society of the Divine Word described:

The people were traumatized by ambulance sirens howling at all hours. Many COVID-19 patients died because hospitals were understaffed. Fear and anxiety were palpable throughout the city as it wailed for its sick and dying.

During the second half of 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic threatened the health and safety of people nationwide and spread to most of the provinces and cities, affecting the lives and livelihood of millions of people. Many people lost their jobs. The country recorded thousands of infections every day during those days. Many households, neighborhoods and wards must be quarantined; hospitals were overwhelmed with patients and the medical staff were stretched thin. In her article, Tran Nhu Y Lan (2022), a medical doctor, commented that never before have Vietnamese people have to painfully receive the news that family members died alone as during the COVID-19. They could not receive the body of their loved ones, but only received the urn of ashes a few days later.

During these difficult times, instead of yielding in the face of challenges, the Vietnamese Catholic Church displayed conviction in the mission of helping people in need. As leaders of the local church, many diocesan bishops wrote to their flock sharing words of prayer and concern for their well-being. In Saigon Archdiocese, Archbishop Joseph Nguyen Nang launched an initiative inviting many priests, religious persons, catechists, and youth volunteers to serve in field hospitals treating COVID-19 patients. Thus, in imitation of the Good Samaritan, the Church through her pastoral agents from all corners of life, have helped heal many of the wounds caused by the pandemic.

Indeed, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Vietnamese government gave permission for hundreds of priests and religious persons to give support to COVID-19 patients in field hospitals (Son Nu 2021). This is a major change in the country where hospitals do not have any official chaplaincy program. In fact, priests, seminarians, and religious sisters are often well-trained in volunteer work and can be valuable human resources. Unfortunately, when it comes to the Vietnamese communist government, its thinking “has long been dominated by political views” (Vo 2021). During the pandemic, although the government wanted to take charge of everything on its own, the priests, religious, and lay volunteers have certainly served the people with joy and confidence. They are always ready to contribute because that is exactly the mission they have received from God: to serve the people in need. This is truly the first time in the history of the country that there were hundreds of Vietnamese priests, religious persons and lay people going beyond the comfort of their parishes, convents, and homes to go to the frontlines to share in the mission, to work together for the needs of their people. Consequently, after having served the COVID-19 patients, Fr. Peter Hoang (2022) wrote in a reflection:

Leaving our religious habits behind and ‘wrapping’ ourselves in a ‘uniform’ of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) from head to toe, we leveled distinctions, overcame distances, and ignored any clericalism or hierarchy among us. Instead, we undertook the common task of fighting against the coronavirus and sharing the same aim of showing God’s love to others. As a result, we experienced the spirit of unity and felt a sense of belonging.

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused much suffering to the Vietnamese people. The positive participation of priests, religious persons and the laity in state hospitals and institutions to support people during pandemic

may have changed the viewpoint of the government about the Catholic Church. As Tran Nhu Y Lan (2022) observes in her article, “The COVID-19 pandemic opens up cooperation between the authorities and religions on the frontlines of the pandemic; thereby, giving way to perhaps more open and respectful relationships.”

After the COVID-19 wave was temporarily repelled, and priests and religious persons had completed their missions, the representative of the Holy See, Archbishop Marek Zalewski, nuncio to Vietnam and the Archbishop of Sai Gon had a meeting with the volunteers at the archdiocesan Pastoral Center. Sharing in the gathering, Archbishop Joseph Nguyen Nang, said he was very moved when he watched the video documenting what the volunteers had done to help patients during the pandemic. He referred to the ‘new home’ of volunteers during their months of service to the patients in hospitals. The archbishop especially thanked God “for giving us the opportunity to serve and hear God’s voice through our brothers and sisters” (Hong Thuy 2022). The archbishop remarked that based on what had taken place in the hospitals, the patients obviously had spiritual needs. While scientific, medical, psychosocial, and professional approaches may be sufficient for providing patient care and medical staff support, for the Catholic Church, pastoral and spiritual solutions are essential as an approach towards holistic care for patients and caregivers. This is true in normal times and especially vital during a pandemic.

Archbishop Marek, in his remarks to the volunteers, said that this was a special meeting because the volunteers were special people. The nuncio quoted the Scripture to affirm the importance of the service of the volunteers during the pandemic, saying: “What you do for the sick, the vulnerable, is to do for Christ” (Matt. 25: 40). Representing the Holy See, the nuncio thanked the bishops, superiors, and volunteers for their generous courage to serve during one of the most stressful times in Vietnam’s pandemic experience (Hong Thuy 2022). The actions of the Vietnam Church during this episode is a good example of the ability of the local church to effectively read and respond to the signs of the times.

### **New Approaches to Vietnamese Catholic Hospital Ministry in the post-Pandemic Time**

In Western countries, hospitals often have a department devoted to the pastoral care of their patients known as chaplaincy being established within their

administrative structure. Hospital chaplains or pastoral staff in this department often consist of priests, religious persons, pastors, or pastoral specialists who are professionally trained in pastoral care and pastoral theology. They receive sufficient knowledge in the areas of patient care and medical and healthcare ethics in their training so as to positively contribute to the spiritual well-being of the patients placed under their care. Part of their professional training is the completion of 1,600 hours as chaplains-in-training at accredited hospitals for medical chaplaincy. In the United States, this program of training is known as Clinical Pastoral Education, whereby the participants are required to have daily visits to patients undergoing treatments at the hospital aside from attending workshops and having group-sessions on pastoral care, crisis management, dealing with stress and tensions, conflict resolution, self-care, and cultural sensitivity, etc.

With an eye toward building up a strong pastoral ministry and presence in hospitals and healthcare facilities in Vietnam, this chapter provides several recommendations as follows:

First, it is essential to affirm the importance of hospital ministry. In Vietnam, the notion of hospital chaplaincy and its role within the hospital are unfamiliar concepts due to an over emphasis having been placed on physical health and not much attention having been given to psychological health and spiritual well-being by those working in the medical profession in the country. Almost all hospitals are under the auspices of the Vietnamese state, which espouses atheism as its official stance. As a result, formal chaplaincy programs cannot be found in any Vietnamese hospital.

Given the current situation, there are many priests, religious, and lay faithful providing pastoral care in many hospitals, but their work is carried out in an unofficial and mostly voluntary manner. Only under the urgency of the situation brought by the COVID-19 pandemic have pastoral volunteers been allowed by the Vietnamese government to be at the forefront in field hospitals (Son Nu 2021). It is the hope of many people that this trend will continue in the future even with the abatement of COVID-19. If the pandemic has proven anything, it is the fact that religious workers add valuable assets to the efforts of caring for the patients in many hospitals. Prompted by their religious ideals and convictions, religious workers are most suited to work in crisis situations such as those of the COVID-19 pandemic. As mentioned above, hospital chaplains are not mere instructors in spiritual life but are also indispensable companions to people who are experiencing emotional, psychological, and spiritual

upheavals in life (Hong Thuy 2022). Their presence helps ensure a more balanced approach to caring for the patients and thus contributes positively to the well-being and quick recovery of the patient as implied in the saying “a good doctor is like an affectionate mother” (Frank 2017).

Second, it is necessary to focus on teamwork training. In the person of the chaplain, one sees the incorporation of diverse areas of expertise and profession. The chaplains are just not those who preoccupy themselves with theological and doctrinal questions; rather they give consideration to those aspects of the human person concerning medicine, psychology, and pastoral care as well. The nature of professional training for hospital chaplains, thus, calls for skills of incorporation, integration, and coordination, which allow for the well-functioning of each chaplain in the healthcare and medical settings such as hospitals and clinics. This idea is especially true when it comes to situations of family dispute whereby the mediating role by the chaplain is needed to bring all family members to the common ground concerning their terminally ill loved ones. In such situations, human skills and knowledge of psychology by the chaplain is beneficial.

Third, chaplaincy today should make full use of communication software and digital devices. Having facilities with high-tech devices has proven useful in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Coping with the contagious nature of the virus and the accompanying social restrictions, hospital chaplaincy has been forced to resort to social media and applications such as FaceTime, Facebook, and Google Meet, etc., in order to sustain itself. These communication means have enabled the types of interaction between the chaplains, the patients and their family members that would have been impossible otherwise given the social restrictions and lockdowns having been instituted by governments throughout the world. Unlike the usual in-person contact, interactions through social media and software demand not only technical knowledge but also a different set of communication skills that the chaplains need to hone. As shared by many chaplains, many patients initially refused to commit themselves to such a ‘virtual’ contact due to perceptions about that method of interaction as being too ‘mechanical’ to make them feel comfortable and hence gain trust.

One possible explanation for this reaction from the patients could be their fatigue from having medical equipment inserted into their body during the treatment as well as feeling encumbered at using high-tech devices and software. Besides, many of them were not convinced about the ‘effective nature’ or efficaciousness of prayers and words of encouragement being communicated through the smartphone or computer screens. Many patients feared pastoral

care given through devices would not have the same effect on their faith, psychology, health as did in-person pastoral care. From the accounts of the chaplains, many people were able to put more trust in this innovative approach to pastoral communication following some time familiarizing themselves with its various technical aspects.

Today, it is difficult to have a good death because most patients receive the medical treatment in the ICU with physicians, nurses, and medical staff fighting until the last minute. Since death happens in the ICU, there is no chance for the family and friends to accompany their loved ones. As Paul Scherz (2020) describes, it is “a death portrayed as a painful failure of medical technique; [and] a death experienced as a loss of control.” Meanwhile, it is a fact that each patient facing death needs spiritual practices, sacraments, and prayers. A concern is how and by what way can hospital chaplaincy provide those patients what they need. Thus, it is recommended that priests, chaplains, physicians, nurses, and caregivers work together to provide spiritual practices, sacraments, and prayers to their patients. This suggestion is probably still difficult for Vietnam hospitals to accomplish. However, it is important to consider, because these services can help patients not to feel isolated and abandoned from the family and community.

Fourth, theological and sacramental aspects of pastoral care is also another main concern for hospital chaplaincy. The Final Rites can only be administered in person to the patients. The minister must have physical contact with the patient receiving the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick for this sacrament to be carried out validly. This requirement must be met without the chaplain forgoing standard safety measures aimed at protecting himself and the patient in question. This was the case for many priests during the COVID-19 pandemic: “If it is a COVID-19 patient or family and there’s an emergency, we are absolutely prepared [to help]. We would say 99 percent of them would run into a fire for patients. That is just how they are wired” (Johnson 2020).

Another important concern in this section is that chaplaincy and those who do ministry in hospitals should pay attention to their self-care and well-being. Pastoral caregivers should exercise proper self-care. After some months spent caring for COVID-19 patients, many priests, seminarians, and religious sisters in Vietnam have come to grasp the truth that providing pastoral care to others is long distance running rather than a sprint to the finish line. They therefore must remain physically and emotionally strong to ensure long-term care and accompaniment to those placed under their care. There is no use in exhausting oneself by trying to help others who are also exhausted and in need of one’s

help. It is thus imperative that the chaplain be healthy and well so as to flexibly respond to emerging challenges as they occur and minimize the effects of being ‘burnt out’ on his or her mental and physical health. Accordingly, the American Psychological Association has the following recommendations concerning self-care for the chaplains: “The ingredients in self-care are well known to every chaplain – diet, physical exercise, sleep, a social life, and spiritual practice. Everyone needs to keep all of these components in mind[...]. We need to do it for our patients (Spiritual Care Association 2020).

Finally, in spiritual accompaniment, chaplaincy should follow the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary. If only every chaplain would always follow the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary in accompanying the patients. Her walking with her Son Jesus on the Road to Calvary exemplifies the spirit of accompaniment that everyone should emulate. Standing beneath the Cross, the experience of emotional pain on the part of the Blessed Mother demonstrates an abiding spirit of accompaniment existing between the Mother and the Son. Hers is totally immersed in the pain that is His total being on the way to death. Her quiet presence manifests a maternal encouragement to Jesus to complete the salvific mission entrusted to Him by the Father. The patient presence of Mary to Jesus at the hour of His death urges Him on to the ultimate consummation in the Father’s love for humanity. Her patient endurance is the source of strength for Jesus to overcome his fear of death: “Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit” (Luke 23: 46).

With her presence, Mother Mary demonstrated divine love and maternity in face of suffering and death, which are to be relayed and transmitted to all humanity as Pope John Paul II mentioned in his Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*: “By a continuation of that motherhood which by the power of the Holy Spirit had given him life, the dying Christ conferred upon the ever Virgin Mary a new kind of motherhood—spiritual and universal—towards all human beings” (No. 26). In his last moments, Jesus entrusted the Mother to John and He also gave John the right to be her child: “Women, this is your son” (John 19: 25), and “This is your mother” (John 19: 27). Being the children in faith of the Blessed Mother, everyone is called to manifest divine maternity and pass on the divine love to each other, especially at the hour of death. In this sense, everyone is exhorted to share in the suffering of Jesus Christ inasmuch as the Blessed Mother shares in her Son’s death at the foot of the Cross by virtue of being present to the suffering patients and accompanying them through their final moments. To this end, patients can be lifted up in their final ordeals by uniting their pain and suffering with those of the Lord and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

## Conclusion

Going through the challenges of life such as diseases and various forms of suffering makes Christians stronger in their devotion to God. With God, everything in this life has its meaning. With God, humanity is able to endure the most horrific of the human experiences, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Saint Paul assures Christian believers of this fact in his Letter to the Corinthians: “My grace is sufficient for you” (2Cor 12: 9).

The challenges of life also compel Christians to reach for the highest Good or the ultimate reality of their existence. In dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, Christians are reminded of their sacred responsibility of allowing God’s Love and Truth to be shown forth, especially in the face of the existential threats to life and creation themselves. Caring for those who are suffering from the impact of COVID-19, hospital chaplains are in an optimal position to give credible witness to God’s Healing Presence, and thus the importance of pastoral care and hospital chaplaincy. There is no other opportune time than now for the accomplishment of this awesome task given the widespread availability of media technology and devices.

For the Vietnamese Catholic Church, it has been more than two years since the first days of the pandemic. Many priests, seminarians, religious sisters, and lay people have had the chance to work with physicians, nurses, and caregivers in hospitals in the most difficult and fierce times. Although the pandemic in Vietnam has been reported to be better, volunteers have come back to the parishes, convents and families, the road to full recovery continues and is still challenging. We can count the number of volunteers who served in the hospitals and medical facilities during the height of the difficulty, but “cannot count the number of sweat drops inside the protective clothing” (Vo 2021). At the same time, we can estimate how many tons of goods have been delivered to the patient rooms during the pandemic, but we cannot measure how much love, mercy, and compassion that they offered to the patients and people in need. Amid danger and difficulties, they chose love, joy, patience, gratitude, and sacrifice. We hope Vietnamese people and the Vietnamese government would learn to accept the service of the Catholic Church, which only seeks to communicate the desire to love and serve our brothers and sisters, especially those who are suffering either in mind, body, or spirit.

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# The Communicative Role of Camillian Chaplains in their Pastoral Ministry during the COVID-19 Pandemic

*Vince Henry M. Salles*

## Introduction

There have already been more than 479 million COVID-19 cases worldwide at the time of writing, which resulted in more than 6.12M casualties. In the Philippines, there are already more than 3.6M cases and 58,000+ deaths. Despite having the “world’s longest lockdown,” as news outlets reported it, the Philippines still sees new cases and deaths due to COVID-19 daily. Observing health protocols, maintaining safe physical distances, wearing face masks and shields are still in force. In-person classes in schools are still limited, and many people have lost their livelihood due to the economy suffering innumerable losses. With majority of the population now vaccinated, risks of getting sick are much lower, but the virus is here to stay.

Apart from suffering the illness itself, patients infected with the virus also deal with loneliness and anxiety due to their isolation in hospitals and quarantine facilities. The pandemic has also taken a toll on the mental health of people. Sickness disrupts a person’s equilibrium, reminds him of humanity’s fragile nature, and raises questions such as the meaning of suffering, our existence in this world, and our destiny. Thus, the challenge of being *unwell* is not merely a physical, psychological, or social one but also includes the spiritual dimension (Cobb 2005, 21). Lartey defines spirituality as “the human capacity for relationship with self, others, world, God, and that which transcends sensory experience” (2003, 140). According to him, spirituality is essential in an individual’s meaning and identity, and the loss of this will immediately and substantially impact his wellbeing. Attention to the spiritual aspect of a patient’s

wellbeing should be considered side-by-side medical treatment and interventions necessary to address their health problems (Cobb, 22). It is the role of hospital chaplains to meet the spiritual needs of the patients and healthcare workers.

### **Hospital Chaplaincy in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The landscape for hospital chaplaincy has changed much due to the health risks brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has impacted how hospital chaplains communicate and provide pastoral care to the patients, their families, and the medical staff. Drummond and Carey acknowledged that spiritual care practitioners are now “forced to stand far off, observing but not near enough to engage” the sick (2020, 174). For this reason, the authors suggested that spiritual care practitioners must adapt their practice to fit the parameters of the present reality since spiritual care is essential for the patient’s wellbeing to be cultivated. Ferrel described the absence of spiritual care and faith communities in hospitals during the first months of the pandemic as “excruciating” (2020, e8). She added that spiritual care is part of the whole-person approach to health care and is not a luxury but a necessity. The question raised Nuzum (2020) may also be the question of many hospital chaplains struggling to provide spiritual comfort to COVID-19 patients: “How do we remain pastorally close while physically distant from patients?” Giffen and Macdonald observed that chaplaincy services in the United Kingdom shifted to being done virtually through phone or video calls (2020, 267-268). They have also noted that patients often mention their anxieties and struggles with various losses in normalcy, livelihood, purpose, socialization, and loved ones. The authors also noticed an increase in conversations about the spiritual: the meaning of life, sources of hope, and wondering ‘where God is’ in this pandemic. Requests for prayer and reading of the Scriptures were also common.

This chapter describes the communicative role of hospital chaplains belonging to the Order of the Ministers of the Infirm (the Camillians) before the pandemic struck, and the adaptation of the regular ministries to care for patients infected by the Coronavirus Disease-2019, their family members, and healthcare workers. By communicative role, I mean the primary task or purpose that is a combination of external (which is imposed) and internal (self) expectations in the area of communication. A hospital chaplain’s communicative role is determined by his religious tradition, training, context,

skills, and the needs of those who receive his care. This study explains how the pandemic altered the communication strategies that these chaplains employed in dealing with the hospital stakeholders and how they incorporated their identity as followers of Camillus de Lellis in their ministry.

The general outline of this chapter is as follows: first, the presentation of the training undergone by the hospital chaplains; second, the enumeration of their regular hospital duties, which are very personable and directed to the spiritual health of the patients, families, and healthcare practitioners; part of their chaplaincy work is also dealing with death and dying; third, the presentation of narratives how the pandemic altered the ways and means hospital chaplains did their ministry; and fourth, based on the stories of the chaplains, presentation of conclusions and recommendations so that the essential roles of chaplains might be considered whenever crises like pandemics happen.

The findings of this study show the essential role of hospital chaplains in the wellbeing of COVID-19 patients. Being infected with the COVID-19 is not only a physical illness since it also dramatically affects one's emotional, mental, and spiritual health. Together with doctors, nurses, and hospital staff, the chaplain can also provide valuable care for the COVID-19 patient. I especially chose the Order of Saint Camillus for this study because of their ministry's particular focus on the sick. I thought that in writing this research, the best practices of the Camillians might be replicated by other religious congregations or the diocesan clergy to reach out to the sick in these extraordinary times of the pandemic when the 'way things were' are challenged to the core.

### **Who the Ministers of the Infirm Are**

The thought of forming a congregation to minister to the sick occurred to Saint Camillus de Lellis after observing the poor condition of hospitals in Rome and the poor treatment of sick people. In the year 1584, Camillus founded a congregation to relieve "the ever-present merciful love of Christ for the sick and bearing witness to it to the world" (Camillian Constitution 2017, no. 1). This congregation was approved and confirmed by Pope Sixtus V in 1586 allowing Camillus and his companions to live together in poverty, chastity, and obedience, and the service of the sick and plague-stricken (Faber 1926, 64). Saint Camillus asked the same Pope for permission to wear a cross of red cloth on their cassocks to distinguish them from other groups. Sixtus V consented to this

request through an apostolic brief titled *Cum nos nuper* allowing Camillus and his companions to adorn their habits with the red cross (66). In 1591, Pope Gregory XIV established the Ministers of the Infirm into a Religious Order and Camillus was elected as its first superior general (99, 101).

Aside from the usual threefold vows that religious men and women profess, the Ministers of the Infirm take a “fourth vow” where they consecrate themselves to the service of the ill “even at the risk of life” (Constitution, no. 28). As regards to their particular ministries, the General Statutes of the Camillians specify the following: serve all kinds of sick people and their families, persons with disabilities, and the elderly; promote health and prevention of sickness; form healthcare workers ethically and professionally using Christian ideals; humanize healthcare institutions and services; exercise pastoral care in health; help developing countries; and promote the life and dignity of the person (no. 23).

The presence of the Camillians in the Philippines began in 1974 and was formally established in 2003. They live out their charism through hospital chaplaincy, administration of healthcare institutions, parish ministry, community-based health care, public health services, and seminary formation (Korzinek 2006, 62). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministers of the Infirm have been active in their work for the sick. Although there were modifications to their usual ministry, they adapted and thought of creative ways to still pastorally serve the sick. Camillian priests assigned as hospital chaplains continued their apostolates despite the risks posed by the pandemic.

### Methodology

In-depth interviews were conducted with four Camillian priests serving as chaplains of hospitals and healthcare institutions taking care of COVID-19 patients. The interviews provided information regarding how the pandemic has changed their pastoral ministry in the hospital and what communicative techniques they use to deal with those infected by the virus, their families, and healthcare workers. This case study involved inquiry conducted virtually through Zoom. My initial plan for data collection was complete enumeration: hence I asked for the list of all Camillian hospital chaplains in the Philippines ministering to COVID-19 patients. However, out of the six hospital chaplains identified, only four agreed to be interviewed. The four chaplains were contacted and sent a message through Facebook messenger explaining the

rationale of the study and the interview questions. The research participants were informed that their identities would be protected with aliases. I transcribed the recordings of the interviews and translated them into English. The transcriptions of the four interviews were presented in narrative form, which is descriptive and detailed. Although this study's sample size is small, the information gathered was adequate to provide rich narratives of chaplain work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Training as a Chaplain**

All four priests in the study, Fr. Matthew, Fr. Mark, Fr. Luke, and Fr. John, were exposed to the pastoral care of the sick since they were still seminarians. They were asked to visit the sick at hospitals and do volunteer work in charitable institutions as part of their formation. The life of Saint Camillus de Lellis and his spirituality in taking care of the sick was also included in their academic curriculum. The four chaplains also mentioned about the Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) they took up for ten weeks to equip them with necessary clinical and pastoral skills in being a chaplain. Fr. Matthew specified that he had daily visitation to the sick, counseling, and self-processing during the CPE. According to him, the CPE helped him manage his personal issues not to be triggered while being with the hospital patients.

For Cobb, a chaplain's knowledge, skills, beliefs, and faith tradition will shape his practice of ministry; thus, training is essential because of the multidimensional nature of the chaplain's role (22). I believe the trainings the chaplains were subjected to aided them to be more prepared in the face of the unprecedented large-scale effect of the current pandemic to everyone, including the Church.

### **Regular Communicative Duties and Responsibilities of a Hospital Chaplain**

Fr. Matthew summed up the chaplain's duty into two areas: "ministry of healing and ministry of hope." According to him, the ministry of healing refers to "listening to the voices of the suffering patients." He acknowledged that listening is not easy since the chaplain has to sit with the patient for hours. Fr. Matthew defined ministry of hope as "giving not a false hope but bringing them

to see Christ's presence in their lives. It is also making the patients appreciate God's hand at work so that they will have hope even though their sickness is irreversible. It is making the patients hope for God's forgiveness of their sins." He also clarified that the chaplain's duties and responsibilities are not only limited to serving the patients but also hospital employees as well. The chaplain also takes care of the hospital staff's psycho-spiritual needs.

Meanwhile, for Fr. Mark, the chaplain is a "representative of the Church, a spiritual minister to safeguard the faith, and give the Sacraments of the Church to the people." He also mentioned about his role in providing spiritual formation for hospital employees.

For Fr. Luke, "the primary task of a hospital chaplain is spiritual accompaniment for the sick and those who are taking care of the sick. I also look after the psycho-emotional needs of the (hospital) employees."

Fr. John shared that one of a hospital chaplain's regular duties is administering the Sacraments of the Holy Eucharist, Anointing of the Sick, and Reconciliation. In addition, the chaplain ministers by visiting the sick daily, acting as a pastoral counselor, and animating the Pastoral Care Committee of the hospital.

Frs. Matthew, Mark, and John said that the hospital chaplain engages in a ministry of presence. When asked about the usual topics of conversation they have with the patients, all four said it depended on what patients wanted to talk about. Fr. Matthew's patients brought up topics about their financial woes because "hospital bills can shoot up to millions." Some patients that Fr. Matthew encountered asked difficult existential questions: "Why me, Lord?" "Will I ever be forgiven of my sins?" "Will I be saved if I die during the operation?" Other patients voiced their anger at God to Fr. Matthew, and some shared their deepest secrets to him that even their family members did not know. He shared that "being able to listen to the patients is a liberating experience for me. My role is to listen, to facilitate the conversation so that the patient will be able to answer his or her own question."

Most of Fr. Mark's patients cannot talk because of the nature of their disease, so when he went to the bedside of the patients, he would just pray with the family for the sick. "I minister to the family; I talk with the family members. They bring up moral and ethical issues and bare their guilt, especially here in the hospital – their usual question is, 'Is it OK to remove the ventilator?' 'Will we just let him die?'" Fr. Mark and the doctors hold conferences to clarify ethical issues in ways understandable to the family members. Some of the patients that Fr. Mark ministered to also asked difficult questions on the meaning of

suffering: “Why did this happen to me?” “Why am I being afflicted?” “Why is God making me suffer?” “Is this a punishment from God?” One nun even asked Fr. Mark why she was suffering, arguing that she was good and obeyed God’s commandments. The chaplain confessed that he did not know how to address these questions.

*Your presence is important. At least you’re there listening to them. You will remind them that although they are suffering, there are people who care for them and love them and do not forsake them. The presence of family members is proof that God’s love is at work. Even though we are suffering, God will send people to become instruments of his love and comfort. I consider myself as a divine instrument to assure the patients and their families that God never abandons them, that God is always with them.*

Fr. Luke usually begins his conversation with patients by asking how they are and how they are feeling. The main concern of the patients, according to him, is about healing. The patients talk about their family members and their life of faith.

The topics of conversation at the bedside of Fr. John’s patients are mostly existential in nature. “Father, will I still get better?” “Will I die already?” “If I die, what will happen to my family?” “Is God punishing me?” “Is there a God?” He related one of his most unforgettable experiences as a chaplain when a child died while being operated. The parents approached him and asked, “Why my child, who is so young? What did we do wrong to deserve this?” Fr. John insisted that a chaplain is not with the patient and his family to answer all their questions. His presence at the bedside assures the patient that he is not alone, that God is with him, and that the patient can articulate his emotions, anger, pain, or even happiness in the chaplain’s presence. “They mention their grief and sorrows, especially if they are already terminally ill.” Aside from these, some patients also share their hopes, realizations, and gratitude to the Lord for giving them a new life.

*There are also others who express their acceptance of the situation, letting go and letting God take control. There are times when the chaplain feels the need to say something to the patient, especially if the question is too deep. He needs to answer so that the patient may come to his senses. The chaplain should also include the element of faith in the conversation.*

According to John Paul II (2000), hospitals and treatment centers “are like shrines, where people participate in Christ’s paschal mystery.” He emphasized that within these structures, people confront the meaning of life, suffering, and death; thus, believers’ skilled and significant presence should never be lacking here. The Holy Father also wrote that the world of health should be evangelized so that it may become a “valuable laboratory for the civilization of love.”

As John Paul II compared hospitals to shrines, I daresay that the hospital chaplains are Christs. To synthesize what the four chaplains related regarding their regular communicative duties and responsibilities, just like Jesus Christ the Divine Physician, they engage in the ministry of healing by their active listening, assuring presence, and consoling words (and even their silence when they really do not know how to respond to the patient). Because the hospital chaplains are ordained ministers of the Church, they can administer the two essential sacraments of healing – Anointing of the Sick and Penance – that targets not only bodily healing but especially spiritual wellbeing. Of course, there is also the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, the heavenly Bread that gives eternal life. The hospital chaplains share in Christ’s ministry of healing sickness and restoring life.

### **Communicating to the Dying and the Bereaved**

One of the salient themes that the interviewed hospital chaplains shared is on death and dying. Hospital chaplains, aside from *being with* the patients in their sickness, also engage in end-of-life care. As Morris states, “Chaplains dwell in the midst of death and dying. Chaplains walk with the wounded” (2020, 7). This is perhaps one of the hardest things to do in the life of a hospital chaplain.

Fr. Matthew admitted that confronting the topic of death and dying is difficult. For instance, in an incident of a paralyzed patient nearing death, when the patient died, his wife got furious and was not able to accept the situation. She even said to the chaplain in a blaming tone of voice, “Father, it seems that you did not pray for my husband! He died already.” Fr. Matthew had to wait for two hours to bless the dead body because the wife kept saying that her husband was still alive. The chaplain told the wife, “Death is a reality of life. All of us will die eventually. For us Christians, death is not the end of everything. Death is a door to the life promised to us by God, and there is the Kingdom of our Lord.” Fr. Matthew shared that in difficult situations, timing is necessary. The chaplain

has to wait for emotions to subside, especially anger. The agitated family members will calm down eventually. Fr. Matthew always assures the family that God is forgiving and loving. “God will forgive you even if you repent in your last breath. God is with us in the darkest and most painful situations of our life.” On the part of the dying person, the chaplain acts as a guide on their way to eternal life. Fr. Matthew said that he facilitates their way to eternal life. He helps them realize two truths: there is a God, and that life will eventually end.

Fr. Mark disclosed that he struggles to lift the spirits of the mourning. In his ministry with the bereaved family, he accompanies them in their grief and assures them of his prayers.

In dealing with dying patients, Fr. Luke said that he carries out a set routine when anointing the patients and giving them last rites. First, he introduces himself as the chaplain and asks the patient if he can pray. He also asks patients if they want to receive the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. The patients usually communicate their response with gestures. If the patient is dying, he proceeds with the rite of commendation. While Fr. Luke admits to feeling some sadness when ministering to the dying, he is at the same time inspired by the patients’ faith.

Fr. John shared that he usually lets the bereaved family members speak their minds to unload their burdens. “When they are calmer, I insert the connectedness of faith in their experience: that they can hold on to their faith in God amid difficulties.”

In summary, the chaplains see themselves as companions of those who are facing death as well as their family. The chaplains confront not only death *per se* but persons who cannot accept the reality of death squarely. This confrontation was also the experience of Christ when Lazarus died, and the sisters Martha and Mary sulked in sadness. Mary stayed at home and did not meet Jesus when he arrived in Bethany (cf Jn 11:20), and Martha said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (Jn 11:21). Chaplains can learn from Christ to weep (Jn 11:35) with the grieving family and assure them that God will take care of the situation.

According to Holst, a hospital chaplain’s pastoral functions comprise two types – overt and covert (1985, 47). Overtly pastoral functions are performed specifically, distinctly, and exclusively by an ordained pastor. These include leading worship, preaching, administration of the sacraments, prayer, Scripture reading, confession, and absolution. For Holst, these functions explicitly manifest the presence and love of God through word and ritual. He calls the overt functions as *kerygma* (verbal proclamation). On the other hand, covert

pastoral functions do not require the pastoral office and may require having skill sets derived from non-theological disciplines. Holst calls this *diakonia* (loving acts) because the communication of God's presence will be likely nonverbal through actions and relationships. The overt and covert pastoral functions surface from the interviews of the chaplains. Their overt pastoral and communicative duties are being the liturgist and counselor of the hospital; while their covert pastoral and communicative roles are being a listener, accompanier, and comforter. They fulfill these roles in relation to the sick, their family members, and hospital personnel.

### **The Pandemic's Impact on Hospital Chaplaincy**

Ferrel predicted that at the intersection of COVID-19, spiritual injury, spiritual distress, and suffering are likely to be exacerbated (e9). In the ongoing onslaught of the pandemic, the work of hospital chaplains has increased in difficulty. As enumerated earlier, a chaplain's duties and responsibilities are very personable acts involving an encounter between peoples in which the patient's spiritual and emotional needs are met (Byrne and Nuzum 2020, 207). Face-to-face presence and communication are essential in the pastoral care of the sick, and it engages both the chaplain and the patient on a meaningful and deeply human level. However, due to the necessary restrictions imposed by government authorities to contain the virus, pastoral ministry has seemingly become depersonalized.

According to Fr. Matthew, the pandemic has dramatically affected his role as a hospital chaplain. In the hospital's COVID-19 areas, he is unable to have any direct contact with the patients. Visits to wards of Persons under Monitoring (PUM) and Persons Under Investigation (PUI) are allowed but limited. During the first months of the lockdown, Fr. Matthew's ministry was limited to only prayers for COVID-19 patients in his daily Mass. In the hospital where Fr. Matthew serves as chaplain, administrators do not allow him to get near COVID-19 patients' bedsides to avoid the risk of infection. Two doctors in the hospital where Fr. Matthew is ministering died due to the virus. Fr. Matthew was able to conduct a virtual visit with one of them while he was being treated. In the visit, the doctor expressed his desire to receive the Sacrament of Confession, but the chaplain was not allowed inside his ward because of health restrictions. To reach a compromise, the priest gave his contact number to the doctor, who then confessed his sins through the phone. The doctor was admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU) and died shortly after that. Although

Fr. Matthew was aware of the directive of the then Manila Apostolic Administrator Bishop Broderick Pabillo forbidding confessions done through digital means or by telephone, he decided to listen to the patient's sins due to grave pastoral reasons. Fr. Matthew conveyed his frustration toward government authorities, saying that those in power were not taking into consideration the role of chaplains for COVID-19 patients.

Meanwhile, Fr. Mark thought that his role as a hospital chaplain just underwent a slight change. For one, he was already used to wearing masks and dealing with patients who have respiratory ailments. With the pandemic, he was only limited to visit two non-COVID-19 wards. The hospital administrators do not allow him to visit wards for COVID-19 patients since they do not want the chaplain to be exposed to the virus. However, he has been able to minister to five COVID-19 patients to anoint the sick at their families' request. In administering the Sacrament of Anointing, Fr. Mark prepared the holy oils in advance and transferred them in sachet packs because if one enters a COVID-19 ward, whatever is brought inside should be left there. Before going inside the COVID-19 ward, Fr. Mark wore a PPE (personal protective equipment), two layers of gloves, and goggles. He approached the patients who were already intubated and recited the invocations from memory. The patients were conscious and were aware of his presence, and one patient even opened his eyes. The oil inside the sachet was dropped on the patient's forehead and hands. After anointing, he threw away the sachet in a bin inside the ward since it was already contaminated. All five patients who were anointed died afterward since they were already severely ill. Fr. Mark praised the dedication of nurses who stay in COVID-19 wards for long hours, exposing themselves to the risk of being sick and wearing PPEs which are inconvenient. His stay in the COVID-19 ward for half an hour was nothing compared to the number of hours the healthcare workers have to stay there. Fr. Mark expressed great joy for having ministered to COVID-19 patients.

*I can't help but feel proud of myself and grateful at the same time to God for allowing me the opportunity to serve. 'Wow, God! I was able to administer your Sacrament to those COVID patients!' It's so uplifting, so fulfilling that I experienced this firsthand! Only a few priests experienced this, and I was one of those given the privilege to enter those wards. I am really fulfilled! I am happy to be a chaplain of a COVID center. It was an overwhelming experience for me.*

Fr. Luke had to deal with significant changes in hospital chaplaincy when the pandemic struck. Fr. Luke had been accustomed to ministering at the bedside of patients, where the approach is very personal and very human. At the bedside, he can make eye contact with the patient, hold their hands or shoulders, and anoint them. He can also touch their heads, shake their hands, and ask how they are. During the COVID-19 pandemic, all these actions can no longer be done. The pandemic has prevented visitations to the sick and if the chaplain is allowed the chance to get near the patients, he will have to don a ‘full battle gear’ – a personal protective equipment – which he needs to protect himself and the patients. Currently, Fr. Luke does his ministry for COVID-19 patients in a separate facility from the hospital where he is assigned. This facility houses patients with mild symptoms—he and his co-chaplains visit this COVID-19 facility weekly.

*We accompany these patients spiritually because we believe that spirituality is a significant factor in the promotion of health. Spirituality is integral to holistic health, yet this is often not met during this pandemic. We see the disease not just as a physical issue but involving the whole person. We also want to meet their psycho-emotional and spiritual needs.*

When making the weekly visit to the healthcare facility, Fr. Luke and his co-chaplains celebrate the Mass wearing personal protective equipment and double face masks, plus face shields. Although wearing the PPE is uncomfortable, he knows that it is necessary to protect the patients and himself. The Mass is usually attended by frontliners who are off duty. The Mass is broadcasted using the hospital’s sound system composed of microphones and speakers placed in front of the building lobby so that the patients inside the wards can hear the Mass. During his homily, Fr. Luke inserts encouraging messages of hope for both the patients and healthcare personnel, assuring them that they are not alone in this trial. He tells the Mass attendees that even though their loved ones are physically away, their love is present, and that the Church, represented by the priests, will stand by them in this crisis. He also emphasizes the importance of keeping their faith during this pandemic and holding on to God who has complete control over difficult situations. Part of their weekly ministry in that healthcare institution is the procession of the Blessed Sacrament around the vicinity. The Blessed Sacrament is brought to the wards after the Mass. The chaplain shared that he witnessed up-close the faith of the patients and nurses who were intently

praying while the Blessed Sacrament was passing by. He has also been greatly moved and inspired to see the people who expressed their desire for healing.

Fr. John believed that the pandemic shook up his ministry as a hospital chaplain. Due to the need for patient privacy, patients cannot be called by their names but only by their number tags, which hinders the personal approach in ministry to the sick. However, this has challenged him to think of effective and creative ways to be able to connect with the sick. Fr. John goes to the same COVID-19 facility as Fr. Luke. Adding to Fr. Luke's narrative about the Mass and the mini procession of the Blessed Sacrament around the facility with a 120-bed capacity, Fr. John mentioned that they depend on the sound system to communicate with the patients inside the wards. He asks the patients to clap loudly or to shout if they are feeling okay or if they already want to go home to their families. When the patients hear the voice of Fr. John, they immediately respond. The shouts and applause of the patients serve as useful feedback for Fr. John who could empathize with them in their desire to be healed as well as their struggle while in isolation. The facility's administration installed internet connection inside the wards to allow the patients to communicate with their family members. "Communication-wise, the patients are still connected with their family members, which serves as one way for their recovery," said Fr. John. During the chaplains' rounds to the wards, they give out booklets of the Novena to Saint Camillus and rosaries to the patients to aid them in their prayer. Fr. John and other chaplains also conduct counselling for COVID-19 patients, PUIs, PUMs, and frontliners. Persons suspected of having the virus (PUIs and PUMs) usually tell the chaplain of the discrimination they experienced from other people. These people feel anxious and afraid because their community members tell them to leave.

In his homily last March 18, 2020, Pope Francis urged his hearers "not to distance ourselves from one another... (but) draw near to others through prayer, through help." The Pope emphasized that people should get close to one another as God got close to them and accompanied them in life. *Getting close* is what the Frs. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John have done so far in their ministry with COVID-19 patients. Although limited by the precautionary measures, the priests were able to *be with* the patients. According to Ferrel, hospital administrators must "forge innovative and clear pathways for chaplains" so that they can minister spiritually to the patients. She likewise acknowledged that chaplains have already been creatively adapting their care model to respond to the health restrictions during this pandemic (e10).

## Communicating with Families of COVID-19 Patients

The Camillian ministry to the sick also includes the patients' families. In his work, Fr. Matthew advises the patients' families to hold on to their faith in these trying times. He asks them to pray for wisdom and serenity to accept whatever will happen to their loved one who is sick. He encourages them to trust God and to trust the doctors who monitor and take care of their patient. The chaplain admitted that his ministry for the families of COVID-19 patients were difficult.

*Imagine the pain that the families go through; how will you uplift their spirits? After the patients die due to the virus, the remains are immediately cremated. The family can no longer see their departed loved ones, and they cannot hold wakes. It's difficult to explain the pain. The chaplain should just be there to support them and be with them.*

Fr. Mark has had the experience of blessing the remains of people who died from COVID-19 at the request of the family. The remains were already in the black body bag, and he was able to bless it at the hospital corridor after being discharged from the morgue. According to Fr. Mark, he wanted to accompany the bereaved families in their grief, but also helped them to understand the restrictions because of the health emergency. "I make them realize that the protocols in place are for their protection. Understandably, the family is devastated, but we are helpless in this situation." In addition, Fr. Mark has been able to celebrate Mass for the Dead, which is his way of accompanying the family as they mourn the loss of their loved one. He said, "The chaplain's presence for the family is significant. The process of grieving is long, but time heals all wounds. What is important is the assurance that they are not alone and that someone is praying for them."

Meanwhile, Fr. Luke said that he was not given the opportunity to minister to COVID-19 patients' families as his ministry was focused on the sick and the hospital workers.

Fr. John has been able to minister to the relatives of COVID-19 patients via online means. In these visits, he listens and accompanies the family in their challenges, and enlists the assistance from fellow members of the Camillians congregation. One of the greatest difficulties for families is not being able to grieve properly and not having the opportunity to see their loved ones who passed away due to COVID-19 because oftentimes, the remains are taken to be cremated or buried quickly. The normal process of honoring the dead include

gathering as a family, praying together, and reminiscing the memory of the departed; everything is done slowly and solemnly. However, when the pandemic struck, the normal rituals of funeral and burial have been suspended or limited. Fr. John remarked, “It’s lonely to die during a pandemic.” In this unprecedented time, Fr. John has even offered the *Requiem* Mass online twice. Although celebrating such a Mass online was awkward for him, Fr. John did it to connect with the grieving relatives and friends, and to help the family to be able to bid goodbye to the departed in a dignified manner. Fr. John shared about the difficulty of coping when one does not have control over the situation.

*One person shared with me that in just a span of three days, his child was admitted to the ICU because his health dilapidated then died afterward due to COVID-19. Where is the time to let go, to bid goodbye, and to prepare yourself? So the emotions of the bereaved are very erratic: we are at the mercy of the situation, we cannot do anything. Letting go and letting God really matters this time. If there is a good side to this situation, it is when we see people having stronger and deeper faith.*

Cockell noted that during the pandemic grieving people and those who sympathize with them have to be inventive and creative because the pain of loss is now harder to bear and to adjust to (2020, 256). For the patients’ family members, spirituality has become increasingly important during this time, and chaplains usually lead in providing spiritual support like praying with and for the sick (Bakar et al 2020, 867-868).

### **Caring for Carers**

Spiritual care is not just limited to those who are sick and their families but also for healthcare workers. They are on the frontline and the pandemic has also taken a toll on them. The hospital chaplain should also address the wellbeing of distressed healthcare workers.

Fr. Matthew takes care of the hospital employees by providing one-on-one counseling using video conferencing tools (Zoom and Facebook messenger). He also encourages them to persevere in the exhausting frontline job in battling COVID-19. He said, “One staff requested that I deliver a good homily to inspire them because many are already resigning from their jobs. I urge them to practice their faith in these difficult times by praying unceasingly. I also tell them that their job is an expression of service, of love for neighbor.”

Fr. Mark takes an active role in the Mental Health team of their hospital where the primary focus is the employees' wellbeing, especially those who are disoriented following the death of their colleagues. Fr. Mark reported that the hospital employees have to deal with great fear and suffering not just from their hazardous occupation but also from the discrimination of other people. Through platforms such as Zoom and Facebook messenger, Fr. Mark accompanies and listens to the stories of the employees' frustration and psychological pain, many of whom relate their experiences in tears. As a hospital chaplain, Fr. Mark had to be ready to receive calls from the medical workers and listen to their struggles.

Fr. Luke talked about the Mental Health Awareness Program organized by the Camillian brothers and fathers for healthcare workers in their institutions. Some of the participants were previously infected with the coronavirus but were able to recover. The program became an avenue for participants to share their intense feelings during the lockdown especially when they discovered that they were infected with the virus.

*I feel grateful for being a Camillian who was given the opportunity to listen to our frontliners' sacred stories. They gave powerful testimonies on how clinging to God and having faith in him helped them get through their intense fears of dying or themselves and their loved ones being sick. Almost all of them shared that their faith gave them hope, and because of their faith, they were able to feel the love of God and their families.*

Fr. John described a chaplain's relationship with healthcare workers as "crucial." He saw healthcare workers and himself as "instruments of healing" who could appreciate the respective role of each other. "During my Masses, I emphasize the essential role, heroism, and sacrifice of our healthcare workers at this time. Our appreciation for them is what gives them strength." Fr. John had counseled healthcare workers who brought up feelings of guilt and fear. According to the chaplain, these healthcare workers feel that they are putting their family members in danger because of their job. "We thought that our doctors and nurses are courageous, but they are also afraid. When they share their struggles to me, they cry, they tremble in fear; so it's very important to make them feel that they are appreciated and that people are praying for them, that there are people who support them and are ready to listen." Fr. John also spoke about the Camillian Mental Health Awareness Program, which is

intended for healthcare workers to release their tensions, similar to a stress debriefing to ensure their mental wellbeing.

Eilers writes that any form of pastoral care of souls is influenced by or has a communication dimension reflected in the pastor's dispositions (2018, 137-138). He adds that the minister should be friendly, has a caring openness to the people he serves, and is very much willing to listen and help. In situations like sickness and death, sensitivity and proper communicative action is required.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The communicative roles of the four Camillian hospital chaplains who served as research participants can be summarized to the following: listener, liturgist, counselor, comforter, and accompanier. These roles were performed in relation to patients, their family members, and hospital personnel. The practice of these communicative roles was significantly impacted by the pandemic in that their ministries had to be performed from a distance in compliance with health protocols. However, the priests managed to be creative in the practice of chaplaincy by using low and high technology. The chaplains used video conferencing tools such as Zoom and Facebook messenger (high technology) to conduct online counseling for patients, their families, and hospital personnel. Online counseling involved listening to stories, *being with*, and *grieving with* more than giving advice. Microphones and speakers (low technology) were used to amplify the rites of the Mass celebrated by two of the chaplains in a healthcare institution so that the patients and healthcare workers can hear it in the wards. Messages filled with hope and inspiration were woven into their homilies. Through the sound system, the chaplains ask the patients inside the wards to clap or shout to decipher their level of energy. The use of technology in ministry was one of the practical recommendations of the World Health Organization (2020) for religious leaders in the context of COVID-19. According to WHO, these virtual pastoral and care visits can be a means to strengthen people's mental and spiritual health, create a sense of calm, and contribute to the resilience of the broader community.

In terms of acting as liturgists, three out of four chaplains were able to minister in person to COVID-19 patients by administering the Sacraments of Anointing of the Sick and Holy Eucharist, with a procession and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament in the hospital corridors. The Camillian chaplains also organized a Mental Health Awareness Program for the wellbeing of healthcare

workers. The chaplains noted the importance of courage and creativity in implementing innovative approaches to take care of people. In the Gospels, Jesus usually healed the sick close-range: he touched them, put spittle on a man's tongue, mud and saliva on a man's eyes. However, Christ also did healings from afar like the case of the servant of a centurion (Mt. 8:5-13), the daughter of the Syrophenician woman (Mk 7:24-30), and the Capernaum official's son (Jn 4:46-54). In these three mentioned cases, the sick never got to be physically touched by Jesus yet they were cured. These events demonstrate that the grace of God can transcend spaces and long distances if people just have faith.

The communicative role of the chaplains was effective in terms of reaching out to the COVID-19 patients, their families, and the healthcare workers. Through their ministry, the people felt accompanied. With the right precaution, the chaplains could also be involved in caring for the COVID-19 patients. Even if some people have reservations, the valuable contribution of the hospital chaplains for the overall wellness of the patients as well as their family members and other workers of the hospital is undeniable, as this study has shown. Both in-person and virtual presence can achieve meaningful pastoral care in this pandemic situation.

This study's results can be used as evidence for taking into careful consideration the essential role of chaplains in the COVID-19 pandemic. The WHO acknowledged the role of religious leaders as 'major' and 'primary' in saving lives, reducing illness, being a source of support, comfort, guidance, and direct health care and social service for the people they minister to (Ibid). Priest chaplains who are willing, healthy, and have followed the health protocols must be allowed inside COVID-19 wards to anoint and hear confessions of the sick and the dying or just *be with* the patients who suffer from isolation. If in-person ministry is not possible, government authorities, after referring to this study, could provide ways for hospital chaplains to reach out to the sick even virtually, for example, by connecting them to private and public hospitals or giving them communication technologies. These practices are useful for not only in the COVID-19 pandemic context, but in the long term where diverse means and creative practices are necessary to enhance and effectively respond to the needs of people involved – chaplains, patients, family members and medical staff. Even if the pandemic ceases, there will always be sick people in hospitals who would need medical attention not just from doctors and nurses but also from chaplains. Christ identified himself with the sick (Mt 25:36) and spent most of his public ministry healing the sick. He has also commissioned his disciples to share in the healing ministry. The Church accompanies the sick with her

intercessory prayer and manifests her assuring presence through the ministers. This study can also catalyze the establishment of a national association of chaplains to share best practices and train a new cohort of pastoral workers. This study may also be used as a model for other hospital chaplains serving COVID-19 patients, their families, and hospital staff. The narratives are good examples of communicative techniques and dispositions that may be used in ministry. It is recommended that this study be replicated among other religious congregations focused on the wellbeing of the sick or among the diocesan clergy assigned as hospital chaplains.

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# CONCLUSION

## Themes for Church Communication in the New Normal

*Anthony Le Duc, SVD*

### From Pandemic to post-Pandemic

It is fair to say in this conclusion chapter that what has been presented in this volume may leave some people unsatisfied – not necessarily because the topics discussed by the authors are inadequate or not relevant to the present situation – but because uncertainty regarding the COVID-19 pandemic still significantly determines the way nations, groups, and individuals make plans around the world. Many of the chapters address the crisis as it is happening with one eye looking forward towards the future beyond the pandemic. This way of framing the discussions may receive some objections from skeptical people who would argue that the pandemic is very much still with us, especially with the arrival of new variants causing a resurgence of the infection rate in many countries. Therefore, it is too premature and presumptuous to speak of a post-pandemic situation. Some have suggested that the virus will always be with us, so anything that implies elimination of the virus from human life is incorrect.

Not denying the present reality of the virus being very much with the world and continuing to impact human life in numerous ways, there are signs that the post-pandemic stage has already begun to take shape. As I am writing this conclusion from Melbourne, Australia in July 2022, the country is experiencing a new wave of infections pinned on the BA.5 variant with the tally up as much as 40,000 in one day. Despite Melbourne being known for enforcing the world's longest lockdown totaling 262 days (six times from March 2020 to October 2021), the people seem to be taking the new developments in strides even as hospitals prepare themselves for a rise in demand for hospital beds. At Sunday Mass in one of the churches, I observed that about half of the congregation did

not wear masks. Some parishioners said to me that they were satisfied with what Australia has done in the last several years to control the pandemic, and they were ready and willing to live with the virus and take it as it comes. They were convinced that vaccination (and in many cases already having COVID-19 previously), though will not prevent re-infection, will save them from serious consequences if re-infected with the virus.

In Thailand where I will be returning from my trip to Australia, the government has fully opened the country to tourism knowing that such a move can result in higher numbers of infection. Upon entering Thailand towards the end of July, I can expect a relatively 'hassle-free' experience since the Thai government has done away with the multiple requirements for entry that were enforced previous to July 2022. Despite this 'back-to-normal' attitude, Thai health officials say that presently there may be tens of thousands of infections more than the reported official daily tally. The reality is many people discover through using ATKs that they are positive for the virus but do not bother to report it to the government but choose to quietly take care of themselves and conduct their daily life as if they are only experiencing a cold or a flu.

What the situations in countries such Australia, Thailand, and many other places around the world demonstrate is that what is considered post-pandemic does not mean that the virus has completely been eliminated. In fact, this will most likely not be the case. Viruses mutate into various strains; some may prove to be dangerous while others do not pose a threat to human wellbeing. Scientists say that the Spanish flu of 1918 which caused the death of at least 50 million people globally never really went away. The culprit of that devastating pandemic, the H1N1 virus, simply mutated and got passed to humans and various animals in successive waves until it simply became a virus that causes the seasonal flu. Nonetheless, for all practical purposes, what has been dubbed by John Barry (2005) as 'The Great Influenza' has ended. Thus, it is in the spirit of the human social, psychological, and emotional outlook that the term 'post-pandemic' has been used in this book, and not just to refer to a point in time in which the World Health Organization makes an official declaration that the pandemic has ended the way the organization declared its beginning on March 11, 2020.

What this book is more concerned with is not official declarations about beginnings and conclusions of the pandemic, but how the Church confronts what has been taking place and draws upon the lessons learned for the present and future work of communication. While many salient points can be concluded

from the research and ideas presented in this volume, the following themes stand out:

### **Communication for Communion**

Communication by the Church continues to be a task carried out with the purpose of establishing ecclesial communion. In the pastoral instruction on social communication entitled *Communio et Progressio* (1971), the document states, “In the Christian faith, the unity and brotherhood of man are the chief aims of all communication” (no. 8). Communication serves to “build new relationships and to fashion a new language which permits men to know themselves better and to understand one another more easily. By this, men are led to a mutual understanding and shared ambition. And this, in turn, inclines them to justice and peace, to good will and active charity, to mutual help, to love and, in the end, to communion” (no. 12). In this regard, it is not only the tools of communication that need to be considered but also the ways in which Church leaders and members engage with each other on an individual as well as communal level.

Christina Kheng suggests the model of engaging in a journey of ‘enquiring together.’ In this open-ended and mutually enriching process, “both sides have more questions than answers.” Therefore, the Church is called to come down from its assumed higher ground of power and knowledge in order to “join with the people in seeking, asking, learning, and even lamenting. This is a stance of radical humility and vulnerability. It accords with a synodal path of walking together with people along the same journey.” Indeed, in the Official Handbook for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches entitled “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission. Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality,” it is affirmed that achieving communion requires not only journeying together but also ongoing mutual listening and sharing in the discernment process. The document affirms, “We are all invited to listen to one another in order to hear the promptings of the Holy Spirit, who comes to guide our human efforts, breathing life and vitality into the Church and leading us into deeper communion for our mission in the world. As the Church embarks on this synodal journey, we must strive to ground ourselves in experiences of authentic listening and discernment on the path of becoming the Church that God calls us to be” (6-7).

Lazar T. Stanislaus emphasizes the need for members and communities within the Church to engage each other interculturally. This is especially essential since the Church exists in a world characterized by “globalization, migration, and trans-nationalization; monoculture is slowly melting and giving way for multicultural society.” An authentic Christian community in the modern age needs to also be an intercultural one where all the members “grow in enriching one another with our presence, cultures, and languages....The other cultures are not only respected, but we also learn from one another and work for transformation of persons in a community.” As the reality of the pandemic has highlighted more glaringly the fissions and inequalities plaguing society, creating a Church characterized by interculturality rather than mere multiculturalism or internationalism communicates a deeper commitment to the values of solidarity, unity, and harmony in the midst of diversity.

The concerns regarding the ecology and care for creation indicate that there is also a need for a vision of relationship that extends beyond ‘human-human’ to ‘human-creation.’ Thus, the paradigm of interculturality can help us to also recognize what can be called the paradigm of ‘inter-creationality.’ The notion of ‘inter-creationality’ highlights need to expand our horizon of relationship and locus of concerns beyond personal or social needs to encompass creation as a whole. Just as concern for the family moves us beyond egoism, concern for the community eliminates nepotism, and concern for human well-being requires conversion from narrow nationalism, concern for creation motivates rejecting consumerism and shifting away from anthropocentrism. In order for ‘inter-creationality’ to be realized, an ecological conversion like that advocated by Pope Francis must take place so that human beings are able to see both themselves and nature as part of the totality of creation that Jesus was sent by God to save. In Chapter 6, Michael Q. Nguyen suggests two ways which the Church can undergo ecological conversion which would support this notion of ‘inter-creationality.’ The first way is to extend agapic love not only to other human beings but also to animals, plants, and other aspects of creation. The second way is to have a deep appreciation for the interconnectedness among all of creation in the same manner that St Francis displayed towards the sun, wind, moon, water, and animals. For Nguyen, the coronavirus played a prophetic role in calling attention to the possibilities of re-envisioning a new human-creation relationship, and also the grave dangers of ignoring its warnings.

### Sources of Wisdom for Communication beyond the Church

In Chapter 8, Anthony Le Duc remarks, “One of the primary tasks of religious leaders across traditions is to present authoritative, orthodox theology and spiritual principles that can help the faithful make sense of the events taking place in their lives and in the world.” This is an ongoing responsibility because in human lives, there are always happenings that cause fear, apprehension, and despair as well as those that bring joy and hope. Confronting the dramatic events of life such as those presented by the coronavirus pandemic can be an overwhelming experience that requires great support in order to maintain a sense of emotional and spiritual balance. Church communication, particularly through its leaders and pastoral agents, needs to employ a variety of strategies and draws upon various resources in order to assist in this communication task. Gnana Patrick rightly highlights the issue of theodicy as a fundamental matter that must be addressed, especially during difficult times of crisis. Communicating the proper understanding about God and God’s role vis-à-vis all that take place in human lives is essential in the work of the Church. Nonetheless, Patrick asserts that “Christian theodicy needs to become explorative rather than stipulative and enunciative; informed with deep quests rather than solution-mongering; propositional rather than proving; witnessing rather than imposing; praying rather than instructing; interacting rather than presuming.” Thus, what is ‘authoritative’ and ‘orthodox’ does not necessarily have to be imposing and oppressive towards the faithful.

Indeed, Norman Melchor R. Peña Jr, through his examination of the seven last words of Jesus on the cross, demonstrates how during tragedy, the utterances of Christ can speak to and enlighten our understanding and the ability to deal with present challenges. In his conclusion, Peña writes, “Religious communication in the new normal strongly affirms God’s relationship with creation and the realities and events. In tragic events like the COVID-19 pandemic, religious communication offers and invites persons to a new perspective and attitude. It allows those in situations of isolation to deepen relationship acknowledging personal limitations and trust. It is an invitation to an entreaty and encounter that strains forward chained within a network of limitation but equally armed within an embodied network of hope.”

Sources for theological and spiritual responses, however, do not have to only come from the Catholic tradition, especially one that is purely Western in origin. In the context of Asia, which is the focus of this book, Patrick points out that Asian wisdom traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and

Confucianism can serve as very valuable resources for understanding human suffering, life, and death. Indeed, “while theologizing from the Asian perspective, we need to take into account the reservoir of religious traditions and the thickness of religious faith operative among the Asian people.” Only when the Asian ethos is given due importance can the theological responses represent ideas deeply rooted in the Asian spirituality and sensibility.

While larger traditions are turned to as resources to formulate sensible responses, one must not overlook lesser-known indigenous traditions that can contribute equally valuable insights and approaches to deal with life events. Brandon Billan Cadingpal chronicles the creative way in which the Kankanaeys, a group of indigenous people in the Philippines employed their traditional ‘*Tengan*’ of rest in order to turn their pandemic lockdown into a meaningful, productive, and spiritually vivifying individual and communal experience. By taking charge of the enforced measures and re-contextualizing them to their unique ethical and cultural perspective, the Kankanaeys were able to turn this otherwise greatly inconvenient event into a time of spiritual self-nourishment, relationship building, and community support. The pandemic experience of this indigenous people in the Philippines prove that age-old traditional values and practices continue to be extremely relevant for the contemporary age, and therefore, must be studied, applied, and celebrated.

### **Pandemic as Opportunity for Creative Ways of Communication**

As much as the pandemic was a time for isolation, quarantine, distancing, it was also an opportunity to explore new ways of being in communion, of reaching out to, and communicating with others. John Patrick Murray rightly observes that the Church is first and foremost the Body of Christ called to communion. He writes, “As Church went into lockdown and ministered online to a more physically distant faithful, one clear lesson from this pandemic is that we as Church are more than a physical community...Spiritual communion is real and not just some excuse for what may not be possible in a physical church setting.” Thus, when displaying communion by gathering in a physical space was not possible, especially for celebrating the Eucharist, online Masses were organized by parishes and dioceses in order to nourish the spiritual life of the faithful. While many Church leaders and lay people lamented the inability to physically gather, they failed to remember that this crisis was also an opportunity to reinforce the long-held belief that the Church is in fact a spiritual communion.

Murray writes, “This pandemic has made the Church appreciate its own wisdom that had been lost or overlooked. It is the wisdom where the stress is on spiritual over physical. Such a stress is not to downgrade either dimension of human reality. Rather it reinforces that the spiritual and the physical, the human and divine are not opposing forces. Christian theology teaches that the human and the divine belong together. The spiritual is part of human life. It is at the core of human life.”

The conviction that communion is not lost despite the inability to physically congregate can motivate Church communicators to look for creative ways to connect with the faithful for both liturgical and non-liturgical purposes. Leo-Martin Angelo R. Ocampo, in his essay, argues for the possibility of seeing ‘teleparticipation’ as an active, meaningful, and authentic way to take part in Eucharistic celebrations, thus contributing to greater communion in the Church. Ocampo quotes Sarah Parvis who emphasizes that “the Catholic Church has never been made up solely of those who are able to be physically at Mass.” Indeed, Ocampo points out that the ‘communion of saints’ is a vivid example of “doctrinal underpinning that can support how the Mass bridges both physical and virtual worlds.” Ocampo thus calls for further explorations of how online Masses can be enhanced in order to promote the spirit of teleparticipation for the sake of greater communion in the Church, especially to benefit those who cannot go to church on Sundays for valid reasons. Rico C. Jacoba, in his explorations of online neighborhoods and church communities, asserts that these online communities can form a ‘technological communion’ with a sacramental presence. According to Jacoba, “Communion of online communities is a communion of real presence mediated by digital technology.” Therefore, in order to promote this communion, the problem of digital inequality must be addressed so that the internet can become a means by which persons can be attached to the body of Christ and become neighbors of one another.

By recognizing that technologically mediated communication is not inherently detrimental to promoting ecclesial communion and that physical communion is not opposed to spiritual communion but in fact two aspects of the same reality, it is imperative upon Church leaders to explore ways to positively use modern technology to promote communion in the Church rather than simply lamenting the loss of in-person interactions. Reality is because human beings, unless they possess some extraordinary ability to communicate telepathically, usually communicate with other humans (an oftentimes with animals) with the help of *something* – be it physical gestures, spoken language,

written texts, an artistic work, a technological device, or a combination of these things. For example, one's spoken word to the listener can either be delivered directly or with the help of a megaphone, an amplifier, or a radio signal. Likewise, communication through an artistic work can take place directly at an art gallery or through other means such as print (posters, books) or digital reproductions (JPEG, PNG, BMP, etc). Thus, the biggest takeaway from the pandemic in terms of Church communication is to recognize the need to thoroughly investigate and develop new modes of communication that may have been heretofore unknown or underutilized in the Church.

### **Ambivalence towards Digitally Mediated Communication**

While digitally mediated communication is widespread and have become indispensable in the modern age, there remains great ambivalence about its value and short and long-term impacts on the life of the Church. In their chapters, Ignatius Minsoo Kim, John Mishen, Leo-Martin Ocampo, and Robin Xavier et al. in various ways discuss the essential role of digital communication technology in the work of Church communication during the pandemic. Whether it was through online Mass, Bible studies, catechism lessons, or prayer groups, digitally mediated communication by Church leaders and pastoral agents served as one of the most important ways that the life of the Church and the spiritual nourishment of the faithful could be sustained. However, a common thread that runs through all their discussions is the ambivalence towards the value and the appropriate level of incorporation of digital communication technology into the work of the Church.

Ambivalence is seen from the very highest positions in the Church down to the rank of the faithful themselves. Ocampo quotes Pope Francis who only begrudgingly allowed for his daily Mass at Casa Santa Marta to be live streamed after Italy went into lockdown:

I say this because someone made me reflect on the danger brought about by this moment that we are experiencing, this pandemic that has made all of us communicate, through the media, through the means of communication, even in matters of religion. Even in this Mass, we are all communicating, but we are not together, spiritually together. The people present here are very few. But there are many people attending: we are together, but not together. Even when it comes to the Sacrament

that you are receiving today, the Eucharist; the people who are connected with us only have Spiritual Communion. And this isn't the Church: this is the Church in a difficult situation, which the Lord permits, but the ideal of the Church is always with the people and with the Sacraments — always. (*Homily* 2020)

The statement by Song Yong-min, a professor at the Catholic University of Incheon (quoted by Minsoo Kim) also reflects this sentiment of ambivalence: “There is also a discourse that the Church could be moved to an online church or to a virtual reality church in the future with the 4th Industrial Revolution. However, this may be the self-rescue of the Church facing the pandemic, but the face-to-face culture, the essence of the sacrament, should not be reduced to non-essential elements... It is necessary to balance the non-face-to-face pastoral method and the face-to-face method.”

What can be seen from these statements is at the same time that there is recognition of the potential of ICT in the work of evangelizing and pastoral communication, Church leaders remain uncertain of where to ‘draw the line’ between ‘virtual’ and ‘physical,’ or to determine what is deemed as ‘real communion’ and what is inauthentic. While there is a consensus for what Minsoo calls ‘an online-offline integrated model,’ the mechanics of this model remain largely undetermined – which perhaps is the primary reason why the attitude of ambivalence continues to exist in various Church circles.

What is undisputed is that there is general acceptance of making use of digital technology in certain aspects of the communication work of the Church. Through the results of the surveys discussed in Xavier et al and Kim, it can easily be seen that the faithful are willing to incorporate digitally mediated religious content into their daily diet of spiritual nourishment. Due to circumstances of the pandemic, there was an ‘induced’ increase in the use of certain activities such as attending online Mass and church group meetings. While a decrease is expected once churches are open and in-person activities are restored, consumption of online religious content will not necessarily decrease. For example, thanks to the pandemic, many elderlies around the world have learned to use the internet to watch masses celebrated by the pope and bishops and priests from multiple places. They have also learned to use social media to participate in interactive online prayer groups. In a similar manner, use of digital technology by pastoral agents is expected to continue. Even the work of hospital chaplaincy discussed by Trong Quang Pham and Vince Henry M. Salles will involve digital communication technology to some extent. For

example, when chaplains cannot be physically present in the same room with the patient due to fear of a contagion, ICT can still help connect the chaplain to the patient in order to provide emotional and spiritual support. Likewise, chaplains can still connect with family members of patients who cannot come to the hospital due to work schedules or distance in order to provide the needed support. Creative and appropriate use of ICT can enhance the effectiveness of the work of hospital chaplaincy as well as other types of ministry of care of the Church. Thus, the ambivalence towards digital communication on the part of Church leaders and pastoral agents – theological or otherwise – needs to be actively examined in order to be able to come up with directions, guidelines, and best practices for the ongoing communication work of the Church. A non-committal attitude not only engenders confusion among pastoral agents and the faithful but also hampers the process of exploration for deeper understanding of and more beneficial engagement with digital technology for the life of the People of God.

### **Indispensable Role of Dialogue in Church Communication**

The pandemic affirms once again that the Church cannot carry out its pastoral and evangelizing mission without dialoguing with other religions, science, and other secular organizations. In the Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, Pope Paul VI affirmed that interreligious dialogue was essential to the Church's mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Nonetheless, the coronavirus pandemic proved to be a challenge for interreligious relationships around the world. As Robert Kisala discusses in his chapter, interreligious relations were strained as various religious groups were scapegoated when a breakout took place in a certain locality. Muslims in India were on the receiving end of widespread criticism and malicious fake news accusing them of intentionally starting the pandemic in India. In South Korea, the Shincheonji Church of Jesus suffered a barrage of criticism from the secular media as well as other religious groups because some of the first cases in the country were traced back to a worship service held at one of the group's gathering in mid-February 2020. Anthony Quyen Huy Nguyen mentions in his article of a similar situation happening in Vietnam in May 2021 with another small Protestant group in Ho Chi Minh City. In times of crisis, without interreligious dialogue sustaining and reinforcing collaborative relationships and mutual understanding, the stress of the situation can lead to the propagation of fake news (misinformation, disinformation,

malinformation) that pits one religious group against the other. Interreligious relations suffer not only when one religious group accuses the other of wrongdoing but also when one group remains passively quiet when another group is attacked by another religious group or the secular media.

Interreligious dialogue is needed in order to prevent the descent into interreligious bickering, conflict, and violence; instead, to work towards unity, solidarity, and mutual collaboration in order to address social issues and to resolve real or perceived conflicts. In light of the digital age, interreligious dialogue needs to be re-contextualized and re-envisioned in terms of the space, method, and participants in the work of interreligious dialogue. Because cyberspace and all the people congregating in the various digital spaces play an enormous role in the religious, social, and political developments of the contemporary world, Church communicators must also explore ways to utilize ICT to carry out the work of interreligious dialogue. As Pope Benedict XVI asserts in the Message for the 47<sup>th</sup> Communication Day (2013), “These spaces, when engaged in a wise and balanced way, help to foster forms of dialogue and debate which, if conducted respectfully and with concern for privacy, responsibility and truthfulness, can reinforce the bonds of unity between individuals and effectively promote the harmony of the human family.” If the Church once tried to enter mosques and synagogues in order to carry out dialogue and build relations, the same must be done in regard to the online platforms where people of various religious traditions and ideologies congregate. In many ways the cyberspace environment is much more challenging because unlike the physical spaces, the entities within this environment are innumerable. If digital spaces are wisely used for interreligious dialogue, even in a pandemic with long periods of enforced lockdowns, the work can continue uninterrupted.

Dialogue in the digital era therefore requires a new consciousness about what ‘everyday life’ means. Everyday life is no longer just about meeting people at the market or relating to a fellow worker at the office. Everyday life also includes all the encounters on social media, the ‘friends’ on Facebook, ‘the followers’ on Instagram and Twitter, and the peers on discussion forums. The term ‘expert’ is no longer just about people with degrees in theology, scriptures, spirituality and the like engaging in seminars and discussions in nicely arranged and air-conditioned rooms at churches, academic institutions and even hotel convention halls. The expert also includes those who are able to penetrate the various platforms on the Internet and engage in dialogue with other ‘experts’ and social media influencers in that online environment. Therefore, as Pope

Benedict XVI affirms, the new context requires the “commitment of all who are conscious of the value of dialogue, reasoned debate and logical argumentation; of people who strive to cultivate forms of discourse and expression which appeal to the noblest aspirations of those engaged in the communication process” (Ibid). The mission of dialogue for the Church now requires a whole new outlook for what constitutes the various forms of dialogue that has traditionally been promulgated by the Church, understood by scholars, and implemented by the people.

In addition to dialoguing with other religions, the Church also needs to carry on the work of dialogue with science and secular institutions in order to work towards addressing common social problems plaguing humanity. Because religious leaders enjoy a high degree of respect from their adherents as well as from political and social leaders, they have the opportunity and the responsibility to engage in dialogical and collaborative relationships with various entities for the benefit of humanity. During the pandemic, national and international bodies enlisted the help of religion in order to communicate correct information to their adherents, provide support for the suffering, and encourage cooperation to push back the pandemic. As Anthony Quyen Nguyen recounts, Vietnamese Church leaders consistently communicated to the faithful to be conscientious of personal and communal actions that impacted the overall outcome of the pandemic in Vietnam. He writes, “Vietnamese Catholics are clearly aware that the prevention of and fighting against COVID-19 is not only a duty and responsibility of all citizens of the country, but more importantly, as a mission of all Christians.” This sense of civic duty comes about as a result of the ability of the Church to dialogue with institutions beyond the Church in order to come to a consensus about the disposition and actions needed to address the crisis.

This work of dialogue with non-Church institutions remains an essential task as the world addresses new and old issues in the new normal. However, dialogue in the ‘prophetic’ mode entails a level of honesty, straightforwardness, and frankness in the way the Church engages with its dialogue partners. Thus, mutual understanding and consensus comes about as a result of not only the ability to listen to another but also to respectfully challenge one another in our assumptions and outlooks. As the document on dialogue of the Society of the Divine Word asserts, dialogue in the prophetic mode requires that “we witness to God’s love by sharing our own convictions boldly and honestly, especially where that love has been obscured by prejudice, violence, and hate. It is clear that we do not dialogue from a neutral position, but out of our own faith.

Together with our dialogue partners, we hope to hear the voice of the Spirit of God calling us forward” (SVD Generalate Document 2000, no. 55). Thus, dialogue with science and other secular institutions is a valuable opportunity for the Church to understand new developments in the secular fields and be able to communicate this knowledge accurately to the faithful as well as appropriately integrate and contextualize such knowledge into the teachings of the Church in the light of the Gospel. At the same time, the Church can challenge the secular institutions in regard to paradigms (e.g., the technocratic paradigm) or ideologies (e.g., relativism, scientism) that do not contribute to integral human and ecological development.

### Final Remarks

As this volume prepares to go to press, in Kazakhstan, religious leaders have come together to participate in the 7th Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. This year’s event is aptly themed “The role of leaders of world and traditional religions in the spiritual and social development of mankind in the post-pandemic period.” In his address to the plenary, Pope Francis said that the pandemic challenges religions to join forces in order to build communion, peace, fraternal acceptance, and to care for our common home. I would like to conclude this volume with words from Francis:

The present meeting invites us to reflect on the role we are called to play in the spiritual and social development of humanity in this post-pandemic world....COVID-19 put us all in the same boat...We are challenged not to squander the powerful sense of solidarity that we experienced by pressing on as if nothing happened, without acknowledging that we must confront together urgent needs that concern us all. The religions must not be indifferent to this: they are called to be present on the front lines, as promoters of unity amid the grave challenges that risk dividing our human family even further...Believers in a post-pandemic world are called to *care*: to care for humanity in all its aspects by becoming *artisans of communion*, witnesses of a cooperation that transcends the confines of our community, ethnic, national and religious affiliations. How do we embark upon so demanding a mission? Where do we begin? We begin by listening to the poor, by giving a voice to the voiceless, by bearing

witness to a global solidarity concerned above all for them, the poor and the needy, who suffered most from the pandemic, which so forcefully brought out the injustice of global inequalities and imbalances.

It may take years or even decades for us to fully understand the extent of the impact that the coronavirus pandemic is having on the world. This volume represents the work of research and critical reflection by the authors at a certain point in time in this ongoing process of change and development. While the Asian context is highlighted in the majority of the chapters, indeed, the book also addresses global issues for the Church and society. In this contemporary age characterized by globalization, constant migration, and digital interconnection, nothing that affects one part of the world is not felt to some extent in another. The pandemic has proven too well the truthfulness of this assertion. Other events taking place simultaneously – climate change, the war in Ukraine, political and social instability in various countries in South America and Africa – further corroborate this idea. Through the critical reflection on the signs of the times presented in this book, it is hoped the Church and its pastoral agents will discover useful directions for its communication work in Asia and beyond.

**CHURCH COMMUNICATION  
IN THE NEW NORMAL  
Perspectives from Asia and Beyond**

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COVID -19 has devastated many Asian countries causing untold deaths and destroying their economies and social relations, especially among the poor, who could not have access to vaccines. The virus has also severely disturbed the rhythm of Church life, particularly in worship and daily Christian activities. While the pandemic is still causing long-term havoc in Asia, it has introduced a 'new normal' into the continent. *Church Communication in the New Normal*, a collection of essays written by Asian social scientists, theologians, and pastoral agents, is the first volume that deals with how the Church in Asia can resume its prophetic mission, liturgical worship, and pastoral ministry in times of pandemic and post-pandemic. I enthusiastically recommend this volume, a fruit of profound scholarship and pastoral sensitivity, not only to all who live and work in Asia but also to those living on other continents, both Christians and followers of other religions, who work for human flourishing.

*Peter C. Phan, The Ignacio Ellacuria Chair of Catholic Social Thought, Georgetown University, USA*

This fascinating volume helpfully combines compelling case studies of the Church responses to the pandemic from throughout Asia with analyses examining the opportunities and challenges offered by the pandemic both to Church communication and to the self-understanding of the Church. It should be essential reading for pastoral ministers, scholars, and communication officers.

*Paul A. Soukup, S.J., Santa Clara University, USA*

*Church Communication in the New Normal* does timely and important scholarly work exploring the across-the-board emergence of faith communication as an essential aspect of ministry. Using COVID-19 as an overall case study, each chapter of *Church Communication in the New Normal* demonstrates the integral role of communication in the way a community of faith gathers, worships and extends care. The book also showcases creative directions for ministry in light of the pandemic experience, all the while rooting the study contextually across a variety of cultural locations both distinct but common, especially from the perspective of faith. This book is an essential addition to global scholarly reflection on pastoral communication.

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