

# Digitally Mediated Pastoral Ministry during the COVID-19 Pandemic, and Questions for the Future

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## **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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