

ESSAY

Blessed be the Vulnerable: An Environmental Spirituality Arising out of the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

A pandemic, named COVID-19, took an unprepared world by surprise. In response, we went into lockdown. Were we going into a quiet space or a confined space? Even to a world that knows chaos so well, this was something new. The God of surprises was surely showing humanity who was in charge. This time of pandemic was giving the world a rare opportunity to slow down and take stock. What were we being taught? Here humanity could glimpse that spirituality matters. Spirituality tells us that we are so much more than what we may realize. Spirituality tells us we are called to look after each other on the planet, without distinction or discrimination, to look after our planet as we look after each other. This is our common home, graciously gifted to us by a loving God. We need each other. Did we learn from this experience? Life is a journey, a process. It is cyclical, rather than linear, not running according to well thought out plans, offered by humanity. The bottom line is that spirituality matters.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic, environmental spirituality, Laudato Si, Asian environmental response*

1. Chaos Leads to Change

At the end of January this year, I came down with COVID-19. My experience proved to me that this is much more than a health crisis, for this pandemic has raised questions around what it means to be a

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person and to be a person in relationship with family, friends, and our world community. This time has served to highlight where our world is failing or lacking. As I look around my sphere of influence in Bangkok, I note a trend among businesses and individuals; namely, those who were on the edge before the pandemic have tended to be more likely to fail, while the stronger standing businesses and individuals have endured. It seems that the latter have a reserve lacked by the former. As one motto of the pandemic says – ‘It will impact more adversely the vulnerable’. I have experienced a pandemic as showing up what is wrong in our world or as exacerbating the world’s woes, thus laying bare so much that is not working. We can easily choose to tolerate or ignore the wrongs of our world for the sake of ease or of making life more comfortable. This approach is a short-term way of coping, resolving nothing. Ultimately, what is wrong will remain so, never being faced for the sake of furthering the greater good. Worse still, it may eventually cause utter chaos, when the wrong then has to be righted in some way, like it or not. Depending on the nature of the issue at hand, the fault will have its impact upon the individual, the local community, and the global community.

The other side is that a pandemic serves as a possible catalyst for dealing with harsh realities, for producing good change. This falls in line with a popularly known interpretation of the Chinese word for ‘crisis.’ In Chinese, two characters make up the word ‘crisis,’ one means danger, the other opportunity. For better or worse, the pandemic has taken its toll on our world, with its adverse impacts upon health, livelihoods, trade, income levels, and social inequality. In responding to social ills and issues arising during the pandemic, another motto arose – ‘*Leave no one behind.*’ This shared a powerful message, highlighting human solidarity is a key to our moving forward out of our mess towards a better world. The pandemic poignantly has highlighted another essential component to human solidarity, namely, our solidarity with our environment. Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Laudato Si* (2015), providentially served as a forerunner for helping deal with the issues of, as well as responding to, a future pandemic. *Laudato Si* teaches us that the environment and the human family stand together (LS, no. 141). Everything is interconnected. We all stand together in the pandemic – humanity and creation. Leave no one behind, neither humanity nor creation. In addressing the needs and ills of one, the needs and ills of the

other are being addressed simultaneously. A motto may be – *A healthy planet and a healthy humanity go together.*

An example may be the public health strategy for a pandemic of social distancing, which has been upheld universally. This one strategy can be applied to looking after the social good of both our world and each other. Enforced lockdowns served to give the planet a needed breathing space for inducing a healthier environment. Social distancing between people aimed to reduce infection levels. It has thus been seen to have a double impact on both humanity and creation. It has allowed humanity an opportunity to stand back, take a good look at life and the environment, and then act to make it better. Social distancing applied at the communal level granted an opportune social space for communities to look anew at life, with the hope of honestly facing social realities that are pulling us down. A pandemic shows change can occur, not just that it needs to occur. This reflects Pope Francis' constant and continually voiced challenge to the Church that we are in a seminal period of history. He clearly names this as: "*We are not living an era of change but a change of era*" (Florence 2015). One may apply this critical reflection beyond the Church to the world, a world that is tiring and sickly, and presently experiencing so much chaos. This lends weight to the theory that chaos leads to change.

2. 'Circuit Breaker'

In the pursuit of deeper reflection, I share two entries from my blog.² I wrote these during my COVID-19 experience. My first sharing describes how I experienced time in self-isolation as a 'circuit breaker':

During a pandemic, everywhere goes into lockdown, except Singapore which uses an unusual sounding term to my ear – 'circuit breaker.' Well, here I am now in my room isolating due to catching the virus and so I learn the wisdom of Singapore, for this time alone is truly a circuit breaker in life.

On first learning of the possibility of my contracting the virus, I

² Sanctasophiafan.blogspot.com

went into shock and then denial, followed closely by forcefully diving into acceptance and doing something about it. What caused my forceful, personal response, acting not to be driven by denial? I hold it is my key sense of responsibility and my commitment to human solidarity and respect. Not by accident, these remain with me as the three keywords I have learnt from the experience of this pandemic. I could do no other.

What have I found as I spend time alone? Life is truly fragile. One's tenure over life is fleeting. So much that may seem important simply goes to one side. The busyness about time consuming, essential matters and tasks just subsides. The importance that one places on so many daily relationships is placed within perspective. While they add to the colour of life, they come and go. Key to sustaining a life that makes meaning is the invested, purposeful engagement we have with primary others in our sphere of influence. That takes a lot of work. We invest too little in such essential engagement and too much in what is easy and fanciful. Still, no matter what, life goes on. It is true that no one is indispensable, not even me.

Circuit breaker is a good term to name this experience of human lockdown, shared or individual. For better or worse, it makes you stand back and look at life, reflect on what really matters and hopefully appreciate with renewed vigor what are the true treasures of a worthwhile life. Perspective is the gift it offers.

For me, a key learning of the pandemic has been to reinforce forcefully that spirituality matters in life. It is a response humanity yearns for amid the human struggle, especially during the extraordinary times of a pandemic. So arose from my experience of this pandemic three key themes for shaping a good life shared by all – *respect, responsibility, and solidarity*. Amazingly, these three words came naturally to me and came together as a ‘learning package.’ They have stayed with me, giving me clear directions for our proceeding together in life. They teach us about much more than just getting out of a pandemic, remaining as intrinsic ingredients used in caring for our brother, our sister, our world.

3. Respect, Responsibility, Solidarity

The human family has been caught in a multi-faceted crisis, not just a health crisis. The many faces of this crisis include the individual, social, political, economic, environmental, and spiritual components of life. All are interconnected and a response to one helps a response to all. Helping humanity is helping our environment, and vice-versa. Building up humanity is building up *'our common home,'* and vice versa. This description of our planet as *'our common home'* is one constantly used in *Laudato Si*. The pandemic raises questions concerning how we live together and how we treat each other and creation. As Francis so creatively and passionately expresses it – “Hear both the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth” (LS, no. 49). Respect, responsibility, solidarity are benchmarks for our measuring how well we hear those cries and, in response, treat our brother and sister, and treat creation accordingly.

Yes, creation is very much our neighbor as are all our brothers and sisters, who may be sitting beside us at church or in the workplace. This is a powerful insight offered by the Christian tradition, based on the theological insight of naming our world as a sacrament, which Pope Francis reassert in *Laudato Si* (no. 9). As sacrament, our world brings us into communion with God and neighbor, and so Francis creatively claims creation as our neighbor: “Human life is clearly grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself” (LS, no. 66). He talks of how the environment is part of society, of how we are in relationship with creation. Just as we relate with our neighbor as our brother and sister, so it is with creation. Francis assumes the language of St Francis of Assisi, referring to the earth as our sister (LS, no. 2).

In describing our relationship with creation, the pope writes, “Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth” (LS, no. 92). This philosophy is revolutionary in a world dominated by the ideology of conquering and using the planet for profit and development. Our planet is better recognized as our brother, our sister, and being respected

as such. As we approach our neighbor with respect, responsibility and solidarity, so we approach our planet. This is reflected in the theme for the Church's Season of Creation 2022, "Listen to the voice of creation." Just as the church is called to listen to the voice of the poor, the marginalized, the vulnerable, so it is called to listen to the voice of a suffering planet. This is treating the planet as an equal partner in dialogue. This is pointing to a truly creative innovation for mission.

4. An Asian Church Response

Like our neighbor, our planet is suffering in our fractious world. It needs our care. Climate change is destroying it. Like every other issue or challenge in our life and world, if we are to face climate change, we need a circuit breaker of great force. As one who lives in Bangkok, I see a city suffering under the pressures of ruthless development. The once beautiful canals are now filthy, unsafe water channels full of waste. High-rise office buildings and condominiums crop up everywhere. This is all happening in a city threatened with rising water levels predicted to make their impact felt by 2050. Yet, what do we see in response? Development is more of the ruthless same, continuing the race to build more and build bigger. Where is the vision? Where is the concern for the environment? A circuit breaker is truly needed. It is time to stand back and look at one's reality with a new perspective. Does not a pandemic allow the opportunity to take on a new and healthier perspective? After all, a pandemic is not just a time to stand still, or as a friend says – "a pandemic is not time to pause but to reset."

Taking up the challenge to plan, restart and renew our shared life on this planet is witnessed by the Catholic Church in Asia in mission, with its purposefully choosing to establish the *Laudato Si* Action Platform – Asia (LSAP – Asia). This is the local Church's response to the universal Church's call to actualize *Laudato Si* in our world, by inviting people to join and form a global platform for action leading to real change. LSAP-Asia states its vision as seeking "a resilient and just Asia built on a strong ecological spirituality that inspires oneness between God, people and all creation" (Vision Statement of LSAP-Asia). As shared in an introductory workshop (29-12-21), this vision is for an Asia that

is hurting and vulnerable. Fact is Asia does not stand alone, standing in solidarity with our suffering world.

A key to a strong response to focus our perspective: As Christians, committed to the gospel, we take the gospel perspective, doing so globally and locally, as with LSAP-Asia. The gospels are transformative documents. Their power is to transform us. Another way of putting it is that the gospels ‘turn everything around.’ They make us look at life and the world differently, from the edge, with a new heart and new eyes. The gospel is revolutionary. It is revolutionary, for the gospel takes us beyond what we see before us to the unseen, the deeper, the essential elements of life and creation, showing us what it truly means to be human.

The revolution firstly and foremostly happens within each of us committed to the gospel. It puts us in touch with our human vulnerability for the sake of taking us beyond ourselves towards the other. The gospel is a communal document, thus sparking a universal, spiritual event that has far-reaching consequences in reality, taking us far beyond our limited boundaries. Therefore, we become much more than we ever imagined possible. It leads us to building the reign of God in this world, here and now. It empowers us to renew and recreate our world. Such a revolutionary thrust is basic if anything is ever to be done to tackle climate change, by a weak humanity out of touch with its soul, seemingly reluctant to act. A weak humanity is one not in touch with its own vulnerability and that of the earth. As one who knows what it means to be vulnerable, as one hopefully not afraid to own his vulnerability, I return to my blog, sharing what I know of myself. I stress that I am first speaking to myself, and I share in the hope that it sheds further light on the life we live together.

*Blessed are the vulnerable, for they will receive much
-a fertile time for enriching their humanity;
-a new and deeper perspective on life;
-the unrequited kindness, thoughts and prayers of others.*

*Woe to us when hiding our vulnerability, when being held
back by it.*

*It's as simple as, we are naturally frightened to be vulnerable,
as we may surrender control; enter the unwanted and the
unknown; lose what we value.*

Who cares in the end?

The fact is the opposite happens for we appreciate

-more deeply who we are;

-what truly matters;

-with new eyes the basic goodness of others.

We see that we are limited and that is okay.

*We see that every person / every life situation has a redeeming
side.*

It takes vulnerability to see that.

So we receive so, so much.

We know ever deeper that we are all loved by God as we are.

It is that simple; it is that difficult.

With the easing of the pandemic restrictions around the world, fear and uncertainty feature as continuing themes of these extraordinary times. There are the raging wars throughout our world, one in our neighboring Myanmar and now a new one in Ukraine. Social problems are taking centre stage around the world, with an energy crisis, plus the rising cost of living, food shortages, unemployment, poverty and inequality. Innocent people more and more are dying, suffering, going hungry, becoming poorer. All this is happening beyond a pandemic. As a result, the world becomes more threatening, a place of loss and destruction. The world becomes a more unsafe place, where we are stepping deeper into the unknown. Despite all that befalls us, life continues in a 'crazy world.' Life must go on. Our planet must survive for it remains our one and only common home. There is no Plan B. We are not God. Rather we are co-creators thanks to God's graciousness towards us.

An essential response to our ever-troubled world is one based on a healthy spirituality. If not, we might end up suffering terminal depression, living a life of hopelessness, going nowhere except into a falling spin, like a plane going out of control. To live life to the full, we need to be a people of hope. Our hope must be real and based on a firm foundation. Hence, let us build upon a healthy spirituality. The

LSAP-Asia points to an ecological spirituality, calling us to be one with the gentle and creative Spirit, indwelling in all of creation, binding all creation together. This same Spirit is making God's dream for a new heaven, a new earth, a new creation alive. Here lies the basis for a living hope. In spite of all that befalls people and creation, Christian hope is real, for it is based on the love that God initiates with creation and on the faith arising within the relationship of love between creator and the created. So, the Christian motto may be expressed: 'Hope is eternal, no matter what.'

5. Mystery, Communion, Spirituality

Within this age of a pandemic and beyond, I am identifying triads that speak of a deeper reality. They begin with the one already named here, arising naturally from the pandemic. So, life during a pandemic and beyond may be defined by those three key themes – *respect, responsibility, solidarity*. As the time and experience of this pandemic and its impacts upon our life have progressed, a second triad came to me. It imparts a deep meaning, named as *mystery, communion, spirituality*. The veil of the pandemic revealed in natural light God as mystery. God is the sacred that is not primarily explained, but experienced. Breathe in the mystery. Sit with the mystery. Life carried on in the silent streets of lockdown where one could experience communion. One could know communion with the other, experiencing it in real and deep ways, knowing that one was not alone but truly one with others. This was all about spirituality, taking one to our deeper, human reality as ones being created by the sacred. The third triad is expressed by my three defining questions for life: *What seduces us? What nourishes us? What sustains us?*

These triads mirror the Christian faith, the Christian concept of a triune God. They came to me naturally through my experience of the pandemic. They were never forced. They are mine but are not for me alone. I share these insights as I experience them so powerfully, lighting up a deeper understanding of life and its meaning in the midst of our ongoing struggle. Over time, they stay with me, never decreasing in their impact on my approach to life. They serve to speak to my experience of

life and enrich it, as it is lived with neighbor, immersed in creation. They show me a direction in caring for both neighbor and creation. I offer them in the hope that they may have a beneficial impact upon a wider humanity, that they may help lead us to spiritual well-being and deeper insights into life and creation. As we relate with our brother, our sister, our environment, a deeper spirituality hopefully leads us to our building up the well-being of our environment, of both neighbor and creation.

The truth is that the world does not have to be as it is, for we made it thus through our choices. As Christians, we strive to live the gospel, that revolutionary document, calling us to ‘ecological transformation’ (LSAP-Asia’s overall goal). Life truly could be different and much better for all of us. Do we really get that? Or do we still feel compelled to follow the unrighteous games of our world? Let us not be overcome by routine, conformity, or fear. Dare to be different. Dare to trod the path never taken. Face our fears and let’s do it anyway. Dare to embrace the gospel.

In the light of our faith, deepened by our shared and lived experience, a challenge is before us. As Pope Francis names it in *Laudato Si*, the essential challenge facing humanity arises out of our not caring for our planet, ‘our common home.’ We too easily choose to abuse our planet, using it for our own short-term gain and profit – dominating it, not loving it. So we pay the price, as with suffering a pandemic. As we do not care for our planet, so we do not care for our brother and sister. Thus, once again we pay a price, as seen in terrible wars. These human-made tragedies lay a challenge before the human heart to live with love, not fear; to care for our common home and humanity with a sense of fraternity, not seeking control, not seeing the other as a threat to our power and avarice. We are called to take risks, to live in new and surprising ways, to be brother and sister to each other and to our planet. All this demands spirituality, which the Mission Statement of LSAP-Asia clearly reinforces: “The mission of LSAP-Asia is to advance ecological spirituality, resilience and creation justice across Asia.”

6. *Imitatio Dei*

We are “created in the image and likeness of God.” Being the ‘*imitatio Dei*,’ thus God calls us to be co-creators, not to be passive

bystanders, nor warrior dominators. As co-creators with the one God, we have a grave responsibility and a humbling role in the world to look after each other and our planet. We are not about earning points for a greater destiny. Rather we are engaged together in the Divine Narrative for the good of humanity and creation. As *Laudato Si* teaches us, the two stand together in unity, everything is interconnected. We are responsible for and with each other. The Beatitudes give us a possible summary of our role and call within this narrative – love, do good, bless, and pray.

On this note, it seems appropriate to finish with my Gospel reflection that I shared at Mass at Bangkok’s Assumption Cathedral, on Sunday, February 13, 2022. COVID-19 was remaining high in people’s minds. In the light of the Gospel, Luke’s Beatitudes (6:17, 20-26), we were being given a lesson on how to live the moral, the better life for the sake of all.

*Fear, uncertainty – themes of these extraordinary times.
We do our daily tasks, we meet with friends, and what happens?
The person next to me has Covid and I step into the unknown.
Another business closes; another job is lost, and what happens?
Real people suffer and they step into the unknown.
Wars are being played out, new ones threaten on the horizon,
innocent people go hungry and what happens?
The world is a more unsafe place and we step into the unknown.
So the list could go on but no need to follow through until the end,
as maybe we not have the time. Who needs to be depressed?
We get the picture.
Truth is that it does not have to be this way.
The gospel turns everything around.
Life could be different for all of us.
Do we get that?
Or do we still need to follow the unrighteous games of our world?
Don’t be overcome by fear.
Dare to be different; dare to embrace the gospel.
Face our fears and let’s do it anyway.
A challenge to the human heart is to be lived.
We are called to take risks, to live in new and unexpected ways.
This is not human! Hmmm!!!
Imitatio Dei. Expect nothing in return.
Love; do good; bless; pray.
It is as simple and as difficult as that.*