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# TABLE OF CONTENTS
## Vol. 19 No. 2, 2021

**BOOK REVIEW**

**REPORT**

# Religious Communication Amid the Pandemic

*Anthony Le Duc, SVD*

In a still fundamentally religious world, religious communication remains an essential part of human life and is carried out through a variety of means. Whether through images, spoken words, written texts, or actions; whether in analog or digital forms of transmission, religious communication provides guidance for living, resources to make sense of the ever changing events taking place in our personal and communal lives, motivation for self-cultivation and transformation, and rationale for our engagement with other people, with the natural environment, with the cosmos, and with the transcendent.

Religious communication tries to appeal to the deepest part of the soul, seek out the furthest recesses of the mind, and compel every muscle of the heart and the body towards the good. The goal for religious communication is simple: the physical, social and spiritual well-being and flourishing of humanity in this life and in the next. Religious communication is "anthropocentric" in so far as it is directed towards the human person and not to trees, animals, viruses or rocks. It is also anthropocentric in that it takes the human person as the primary center of relationship – with self, with others, with nature and with the Ultimate. Nonetheless, religious communication, when successful, can lead to total human self-transformation that not only promotes well-being of the individual but also all those that exist in the interconnected network of life in the physical universe.

Our major religious traditions – Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Chinese religions all have resources that in one way or another affirms the interconnected (and also interdependent) nature of all beings – from the tiniest microbes to the widest galaxies in the cosmos. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the midst of this ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic, in which the so called "enemy" is a virtually invisible coronavirus, one of the tiniest organisms in the universe, religious communication plays an essential role in how humanity ought to understand and confront the crisis.

Certainly, the content of religious communication should not sound like information that comes out of a local or national governing body, the World Health Organization or the Center for Disease Control. It should not sound like what one hears on the evening news, or read like a social media post with recipes for how to prevent infection. Moreover, it should not resemble the antagonistic tone of American cable TV opinion programs. Undoubtedly, religious communication, especially that which is carried out by prominent or well-respected religious leaders, can contain content that would normally be communicated by secular leaders, medical experts, and social scientists. We have seen that oftentimes, the same piece of information is received differently depending on who communicates it. However, ultimately, religious communicators, in their role as religious communicators, are neither political leaders nor scientists.

The questions for religious communicators to explore and critically reflect upon are: What is the nature, purpose and method of religious communication in regards to the COVID-19 pandemic in the present and in the future? What unique perspectives and insights can religious communication contribute to understanding more profoundly about the pandemic with its multiple intertwining dimensions – political, social, scientific, psychological and spiritual? Like many other woes affecting humanity, the COVID-19 pandemic

is a complex problem that requires interdisciplinary, dialogical and dialetical approaches to discover solutions.

Indeed, as the world's human population spends the last nearly two years, and counting, obsessively following the pandemic with daily tallies of infections, deaths, recovery locally and globally, not to mention all the economic and emotional tolls on society, it might be helpful to ask the questions:

- Is finding out the source of the virus as important as finding out the source of the many pandemics plaguing humanity at this time? Buddhism identifies for us the plagues of greed, hatred and delusion. But indeed there are many others.

- Is the coronavirus the enemy that we should fear the most and try our hardest to fight rather than another enemy that is no less dangerous to the well-being of the present and future world? Pope Francis identifies indifference as the enemy that must be battled against in the modern time. For Pope Francis, "Indifference is a virus that is dangerously contagious in our time, a time when we are ever more connected with others, but are increasingly less attentive to others."

- Is vaccination in order to attain herd immunity the ultimate method to eliminate an ever mutating virus, or should there also be other curative therapies for the maladies of humanity? Here, the yogas introduced by the Hindu traditions are worth considering.

- Finally, is pre-pandemic life with our usual ways of traveling, consuming resources, building cities, developing economies, and creating weapons what we are aiming to return to? Certainly, our religious resources would have many things to say about this matter.

In short, religious communication, in its true form, approaches the "Who, What, When, Where, Why and How" questions differently from the other types of communication. It employs its own sources of information and inspiration, in addition to that available to the secular disciplines. As a result, religious communication should be able to present unique perspectives that are not facsimiles of other fields of communication.

The challenge, however, is for religious communicators to understand the particularity and uniqueness of who they are, so that they are able to fulfill their role in an appropriate manner. Amid the turmoils and the disruptions inflicted upon humanity by the global pandemic, religious communicators are expected to be the voice of spiritual consolation, theological balance, moral support, and ethical guidance. It is unfortunate when religious leaders and communicators express themselves without being conscious of their identity, leading to the sort of communication that should be reserved for other disciplines. Worse yet, it even instills fear in the listener, instigates social division, heightens interreligious conflict, and perpetuates unfounded conspiracy theories. According to Mark Twain, "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug." Religious communicators, when using inappropriate words and images to communicate, can cause enormous damage.

On 5-6 November 2021, the Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication organized its 12th International Roundtable for the first time completely online with the theme *"Religious Communication During and Post Coronavirus Pandemic: Examining Present and Future Models and Strategies."* The Roundtable aimed to explore some of the issues mentioned here as well as others that scholars across disciplines and religious traditions found pertinent to the theme. Notwithstanding that the issues surrounding the pandemic has been greatly discussed in innumerable academic conferences and scholarly publications,

ARC felt that organizing the talks from the perspective of religious communication, with particular attention to the Asian milieu, would highlight some important aspects of the pandemic and would contribute fruitfully to the research and dialogue about the crisis.

As the pandemic has shown us that we are all interconnected in how we can transmit the virus to one another, it should also affirm that we can be part of the solution, not only in addressing the immediate concerns of the pandemic, but all the maladies in which humanity and nature are confronting now and in the future. Due to special circumstances presented by the pandemic, there was no physical table for the participants to gather around this year. However, everything is connected to each other in some way. And in reality, there is nothing that is truly isolated from another thing in the universe. Space is one and all encompassing. We are fortunate that this pandemic has appeared at a time in the history of the world when, with the help of digital technology and the internet, we are reminded that we still remain interconnected and can still be one.

# Impact of COVID-19 on Digital Religious Communication among Syro-Malabar Catholics of South India

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## Abstract

*The Internet has marked the evolution of a digitalised era that has revolutionised all walks of life. Digital technology has paved its way into every aspect of daily life, and online platforms have opened up new horizons to make life easier. Further, with the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdown, there has been a giant leap in the dependence on online platforms and digital technology for various purposes, including matters of religion and faith. COVID-19 protocols urged people to be contingent on digital technology for religious purposes. In this research, we explore the impact of COVID-19 protocols on the usage of online platforms for religious communication by the Syro-Malabar Catholic community, an ethnic Christian sect rooted in South India. The community, being traditional and Eucharistic-centred in nature, seldom expressed itself as early adopters of digital religious communication. The present study reveals that COVID-19 protocols played the*

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*role of a catalyst for digital religious communication among the Syro-Malabar Catholic community. The unprecedented social circumstances prompted the community to use digital technology for religious purposes, a phenomenon which we term 'Induced online religion'.*

**Keywords:** *Digital Religion, COVID-19, Christianity, Online Religion, Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, Religious Communication, digital technology*

## Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak was an unprecedented event that dictated crucial changes in societal dynamics and culture. Social distancing imposed as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 outbreak has affected the global society in various aspects. One of the important consequences of the lockdown was the surge in digital technology usage and increased dependence on online platforms for various purposes such as work, healthcare, education, entertainment etc. Recent data given by the Nielsen website confirms that unique social situations have acted as a catalyst for increased usage of online services and digital technology. A similar trend was observed on the dependence of online platforms for religious purposes. It is an undebatable fact that believers tend to seek solace and consolation in religion when disasters occur[5], which provides strength to their morale to overcome challenging situations.[6] As it could be expected, the desperate times of the pandemic escalated the need for religious communication among the followers. However, the normal methods

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[5] Sanne Bech Holmgaard, "The Role of Religion in Local Perceptions of Disasters: The Case of Post-Tsunami Religious and Social Change in Samoa," *Environmental Hazards* 18, no. 4 (2018): 311-325, doi:10.1080/17477 891.2018.1546664.

[6] Jeanet Sinding Bentzen, "Acts of God? Religiosity and Natural Disasters across Subnational World Districts," *The Economic Journal* 129, no. 622 (2019): 2295-2321, doi:10.1093/ej/uez008.

of practising religion were hampered due to the COVID-19 protocols. This urged people to be contingent on digital technology for religious purposes.

Though digitised religion was not a new idea among western societies, eastern society was not familiar with the concept. The literature clearly indicates the popularity of 'digital religion' among western religious communities. Researchers have identified the relationship between religion and the Internet as early as 1995.[7] 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[8], few eastern religious communities adapted to it. 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.[9]

Among the South Asian countries, India is unique in terms of religious diversity and culture. India is a land known for its tradition and devotion.[10] According to the religious census of 2011, as listed in the official website of the Ministry of Home Affairs (Government of India), India has a versatile religious distribution in the order of Hinduism (79.80%), Islam (14.23%), Christianity (2.30%), Sikh (1.72%) and all the others contributing to less than 1% of the population. In the wake of

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[7] J. Kinney, "Net Worth? Religion, Cyberspace and the Future," *Futures* 27, no. 7 (1995): 763-776, doi:10.1016/0016-3287(95)00842-k

[8] Christopher Helland, "Review: Give Me That Online Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 3 (2005): 905-908, doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfi089.

[9] Shengju Xu and Heidi A. Campbell, "Surveying Digital Religion in China: Characteristics of Religion on the Internet in Mainland China," *The Communication Review* 21, no. 4 (2018): 253-276, doi:10.1080/10714421.2018.1535729.

[10] Sribas Goswami, "Spiritual Dimensions of Indian Culture," *Journal of Sociology and Social Work* 2, no. 1 (2014): 241-256.

the COVID-19 outbreak, a nationwide lockdown was declared by the Government of India from 24 March 2020, barring all public gatherings, including religious practices (as per the website of the Ministry of Home Affairs). For a community for whom religion is part and parcel of their routine, the lockdown brought down severe inflictions. The present research is aimed at identifying and analysing the type of inflictions brought upon the Syro-Malabar Catholic community of Kerala, the southernmost state of India. The study attempts to determine the impact of COVID-19 protocols on the usage of online platforms by the Syro-Malabar Catholic community for religious purposes and to comprehend how the Religious Social Shaping of Technology (RSST) theory put forward by Campbell apply to their online religious behaviour.[11-12]

## Religious Social Shaping Theory by Heidi H Campbell

Digital religion research has been explored thoroughly by scholars in both religion and communication. There have been various theories, such as the theory of mediatisation,[13] mediation of meaning[14-15] and the

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[11] Heidi A. Campbell, "Considering Spiritual Dimensions within Computer-Mediated Communication Studies," *New Media & Society* 7, no. 1 (2005): 110-134, doi:10.1177/1461444805049147.

[12] Heidi A. Campbell, "Surveying Theoretical Approaches within Digital Religion Studies," *New Media & Society* 19, no. 1 (2016): 15-24, doi:10.1177/1461444816649912.

[13] Andreas Hepp, Stig Hjarvard and Knut Lundby, "Mediatization – Empirical Perspectives: An Introduction to a Special Issue," *Communications* 35, no. 3 (2010), doi:10.1515/comm.2010.012.

[14] Michael O. Emerson, "*The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* Ed. James A. Beckford and N.J. Demearth III," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 3 (2009): 616-617, doi:10.1111/j.1468-5906.2009.01469_1.x.

[15] Stewart M. Hoover, "Book Review Jeffrey Mahan (2014). *Media, Religion and Culture: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge. Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture," *Asian Communication Research* 13, no. 2 (2016): 86-89, doi:10.20879/acr.2016.13.2.86.

religious, social shaping of technology (RSST).[16] Campbell suggested the theoretical lens as an extension of the social shaping of technology (SST) theory put forward by William and Edge in 1996.[17]

RSST is a theoretical lens that identifies four crucial layers in the response of a religious community towards the introduction of mediated transference of religious communication. The four aspects being investigated are history and tradition, core beliefs, negotiations, and communal framing with respect to each community.[18] The history and tradition of the prospective community influence their core beliefs and are based upon which they negotiate with any impending changes happening around them. These negotiations pave the way towards an eventual communal framing, where the religious community frames the technology and how it suits their needs without compromising their core beliefs and traditions. The Syro-Malabar Church community was closely examined for all these aspects, and the detailed analysis in accordance with the theoretical lens is presented.

### Syro-Malabar Catholic Church of Kerala, India: History, Tradition and Core Beliefs

Kerala holds the acclaim of being the birth ground of Christianity in India and is often considered to be the 'Vatican of India'.[19] The

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[16]Heidi A. Campbell, "Surveying Theoretical Approaches within Digital Religion Studies," *New Media & Society* 19, no. 1 (2016): 15-24, doi:10.1177/1461444816649912.

[17] Robin Williams and David Edge, "The Social Shaping of Technology," *Research Policy* 25, no. 6 (1996): 865-899, doi:10.1016/0048-7333(96)00885-2.

[18] Heidi A. Campbell, "Review of *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* Ed. Heidi A. Campbell (Routledge, 2013)," *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 3, no. 2 (2014): 163-165, doi:10.1163/21659214-90000058.

[19] Xavier Kochuparampil, *"Evangelization in India: A Theological Analysis of the Missionary Role of the Syro-Malabar Church in the Light of the Vatican II and Post-Conciliar Documents*, Vadavathoor, Kottayam (Kerala):

Syro-Malabar Church represents the oldest community of Christianity in India.[20] 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 5 million followers (including 480683 migrants outside Kerala) and 8547 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.[21] 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.

The Syro-Malabar Church is different from the Western Church in many ways. The major difference is the proportion of believers to the number of Churches, or more importantly, the high ratio of Churches within the small geographical area of Kerala. Further, the number of available priests is high compared to the Western Churches, and there are 8547 priests existing in the Church as per the official documents. The Church also has a high number of retreat centres (94) under its wings. Moreover, the Church is resolute in retaining and perpetuating its tradition and culture. They are a unique class of Christians falling under the 24 Oriental Churches who follow the Syriac liturgy but incorporating the ethnic identities.

For the believers, religion and faith is part of their personal identity. They have a significant share of Churchgoers, and the parish

OIRSI, Oriental Institute of Religious Studies India, 1993: 556," *Exchange* 24, no. 1 (1995): 81-82, doi:10.1163/157254395x00063.

[20] Sebastian Madathummuriyil, "Liturgical 'Reform' in The Syro-Malabar Church: Observations on Context, Culture, and Text," *Studia Liturgica* 44, no. 1-2 (2014): 96-108, doi:10.1177/00393207140441-209.

[21] Francis Kanichikattil, "Liturgical Renewal in the Syro-Malabar Church: Observations and Prospects," *Studia Liturgica* 30, no. 2 (2000): 151-158, doi:10.1177/003932070003000203.

system is part of their social life. Kanichikkattil observes that the social life of each of the believers revolves around their corresponding Church.[16] Each and every social institution like hospital, media and school came into existence in and around parish churches.

A for their digital habits, the Syro-Malabar Community is a highly educated community that owns the highest number of educational institutions in the state. [14] The state of Kerala itself is characterised by its high literacy rate and technological proficiency. According to the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), Kerala stands second in terms of internet penetration. A fraction of 14% of the total population of the state is comprised of Syro-Malabar Catholics, which lends to their significant online presence. Knowing the convictions of such a society will give us an insight into the perspectives of an indigenous community equipped with digital technology.

As per the official reports, Kerala was the first state in India to be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. KCBC (Kerala Catholic Bishops' Conference) ensured that the COVID-19 norms mandated by the government were followed in every Catholic Church of Kerala. Moreover, the KCBC asked the priests to make necessary arrangements so that the faithful have access to sacraments, especially Holy Mass, through online platforms. It is also interesting to note that Shekinah, Goodness and Shalom, three prominent Christian Channels, were approached by KCBC through official orders to increase the frequency of telecasting Holy Mass. The circulars released through the official channels of KCBC (via the KCBC website) confirms that this was the first time in history that due to an unprecedented event such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the authorities have endorsed the usage of online platforms for attending religious services, especially Holy Mass.

The Syro-Malabar Catholic Church of Kerala exists in agreement with the KCBC and therefore executed every instruction from the KCBC regarding the usage of online platforms for religious purposes.

The Syro-Malabar Church Media Commission, established in 2019, has guided the community through the tough times. The Syro-Malabar Church Internet Mission (SMCIM), established in 2006, has been handling the digital presence of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church through Facebook and YouTube platforms. These digital platforms started the online streaming of sacraments, most importantly Holy Mass, exclusively during the pandemic. Nevertheless, the church authorities still upheld the view that 'this is optional and will not be entertained once COVID-19 passes' (Quoted from a personal interview that the author had with the Director of Shekinah Television (leading Christian channel in Kerala)).

Although there are various studies about 'digital religion',[22-23] there are no reported studies that analyse the concept in the Syro-Malabar Catholic community of Kerala. Additionally, the two layers of the RSST lens: history (and tradition) and core beliefs, have already been established for the Syro-Malabar Church. Therefore, we are investigating the negotiations and communal framing in the Church during the pandemic. Furthermore, since the COVID-19 induced social distancing itself is a unique event, there are few studies available connecting the impact of digital technology on religion at the time of COVID-19. However, an interesting behavioural pattern to be evaluated for this particular community is whether the increased usage of online platforms for receiving sacraments was a temporary phenomenon.

## Materials and Methods

Quantitative data was collected using the survey method with

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[22] Patrick Eisenlohr, "Reconsidering Mediatization of Religion: Islamic Televangelism in India," *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 6 (2016): 869-884, doi:10.1177/0163443716679032.

[23] Mia Lövheim and Heidi A. Campbell, "Considering Critical Methods and Theoretical Lenses in Digital Religion Studies," *New Media & Society* 19, no. 1 (2017): 5-14, doi:10.1177/1461444816649911.

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 40. The Split Half Reliability Coefficient [24]was calculated, and it was found to be 0.8791. The final data were collected and considered for analysis. The questionnaire evaluated the demographic profile, and the opinions of the respondents were measured using the Likert scale. The questionnaire was focused on the most popular digital technology platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Whatsapp, Instagram, Website and blogs, as per the IAMAI survey and in accordance with the pilot study results.

The data was collected by sending the questionnaire to the respondents using an online platform due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The collection of data using an online platform is also suggested by Campbell and Evolvi.[25] The survey was carried out two weeks post-cessation of all religious practices involving the public due to the pandemic situation.

## Participants

For a comprehensive analysis, 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.

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[24] Bruce Frey, "Split-Half Reliability," *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Measurement, and Evaluation*, 2018, doi:10.4135/9781506326139.n653.

[25] Heidi A. Campbell and Giulia Evolvi, "Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research on Emerging Technologies," *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies* 2, no. 1 (2019): 5-17, doi:10.1002/hbe2.149.

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.

## Results

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% |
| 35-45 | 33.60% |
| 45-55 | 15.10% |
| 55 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% |
| 35-45 | 41.18% | 58.82% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| 45-55 | 39.13% | 60.87% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| 55 and above | 48.15% | 33.33% | 11.11% | 7.41% | 0.00% |

As evident from Table 2, the majority of the priests (95.39%) have voted either 'strongly agree' or 'agree' 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?**

| Only at times of social distancing | More frequently in times of social distancing | Always | Never |
|---|---|---|---|
| 12.50% | 25.00% | 57.20% | 5.30% |

Overall, 82.2% of the total respondents confirm the usage of online platforms for religious purposes. About 37% of the communicators agree 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?**

| Before COVID-19 social distancing | Recently due to COVID-19 social distancing | Never |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| 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 per cent of people who were using the resources even before COVID-19 social distancing (81.6%).

7. Mention the various social media platforms you use for religious purposes
152 responses
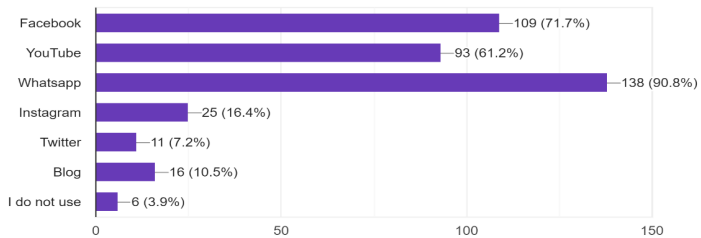


**Figure 1. Digital technology platforms used for religious communication**

In an overall ranking of the various digital technology platforms used by the priests, WhatsApp stood first while only a small percentage refrained from using any online platforms (Figure 1). Although global trends suggest blogs to be more popular among the followers of 'digital religion',[26-27] the current survey indicates

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[26] Heidi A. Campbell, "Religion and the Internet: A Microcosm for Studying Internet Trends and Implications," *New Media & Society* 15, no. 5 (2012): 680-694, doi:10.1177/1461444812462848.

[27] Giulia Evolvi, "Online Catholic Communities: Community, Authority, and Religious Individualization, Written by Marta Kolodziejska," *Journal of Religion in Europe* 12, no. 1 (2019): 79-80, doi:10.1163/18748929-01201007.

that the trend is not the same in this community. Further, the popularity of WhatsApp could be due to the ease and accessibility of the platform.



Social media platforms are an effective tool for communicating religious messages at times of social distancing. Do you agree?

Neutral
2.6%

Agree
38.8%

Strongly Agree
57.2%
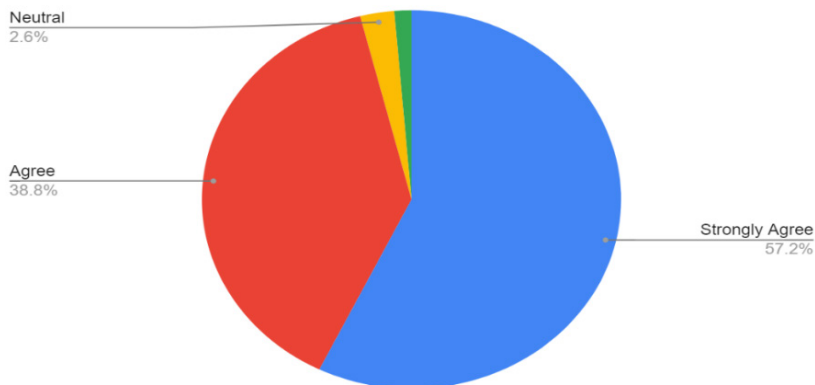
**Figure 2. Effectiveness of digital technology for religious communication**

As evident from Figure 2, the majority of the religious communicators (96%) concur 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 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 to see that 63.8% of the priests think they are 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'.[28]

**Table 5: Mode of learning (digital technology) versus the age of religious communicators**

| Age | Learned as part of my priestly training | Learned from other sources | I have not yet learned |
|---|---|---|---|
| 25-35 | 41.18% | 56.86% | 1.96% |
| 35-45 | 15.69% | 84.31% | 0.00% |
| 45-55 | 8.70% | 86.96% | 4.35% |
| 55 and above | 11.11% | 70.37% | 18.52% |

Table 5 examines the context of training received by the communicators with respect to their age. It is evident that there is an apparent lack of training among the age group of 45 and above. A significant share of the communicators from this age group claimed to have learned digital technology from other sources. Furthermore, the number of communicators who received official training in the use of media is higher among the younger age group. Only a marginal per cent of the age group said they have not yet learned digital technology.

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[28] Paul K. McClure, "Tinkering with Technology and Religion in the Digital Age: The Effects of Internet Use on Religious Belief, Behavior, and Belonging," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56, no. 3 (2017): 481-497, doi:10.1111/jssr.12365.

**Table 6: 'Online' religious practices through digital technology have more attendees than services in the Church. Do you agree?**

| Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 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 population (51.3%) disagreed with it. A significant population also chose to be neutral on the statement (Table 6). 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 7: Will you continue to use digital technology platforms for religious purposes after-08 the lockdown?**

| Age | Apart from Holy Mass, I will continue to use digital technology for religious purposes | I will continue using for all religious services | I will not use digital technology platforms for any religious purposes | None of the above |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 25-35 | 54.90% | 41.18% | 1.96% | 1.96% |
| 35-45 | 49.02% | 45.10% | 3.92% | 1.96% |
| 45-55 | 52.17% | 21.74% | 13.04% | 13.04% |
| 55 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 7 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 has 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 8: Age-wise distribution of respondents**

| Age | Percentage |
|-----|-----------|
| 15-25 | 34.40% |
| 25-35 | 31.02% |
| 35-45 | 17.86% |
| 45-55 | 9.02% |
| 55 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) have 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 8).
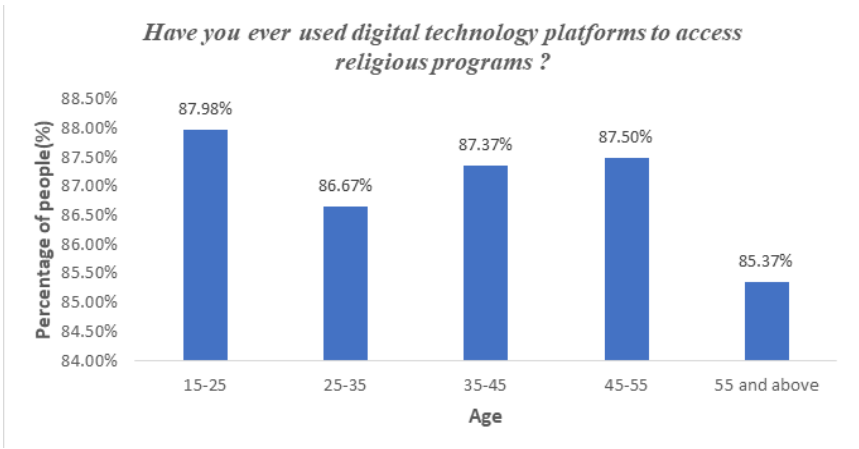
**Figure 3. Usage of digital technology platforms for religious purposes (Age-wise data)**

The usage pattern of digital technology for religious purposes among believers is depicted in Figure 3. 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 say 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 9: Do you support the usage of digital technology for streaming religious programs?**

| Only at times of social distancing | More frequently in times of social distancing | Always | Never |
|---|---|---|---|
| 18.20% | 19.50% | 55.10% | 7.10% |

**Table 10: When did you start to use digital technology platforms for religious purposes?**

| Before COVID-19 social distancing | Recently due to COVID-19 social distancing | Never |
|---|---|---|
| 76.30% | 14.30% | 9.40% |

Beyond doubt, it can be seen from Table 9 and Table 10 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

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8. Mention the various social media platforms you use to access religious programs
532 responses

Facebook — 321 (60.3%)
YouTube — 433 (81.4%)
Whatsapp — 360 (67.7%)
Instagram — 86 (16.2%)
Twitter — 12 (2.3%)
Blog — 17 (3.2%)
I do not use — 40 (7.5%)
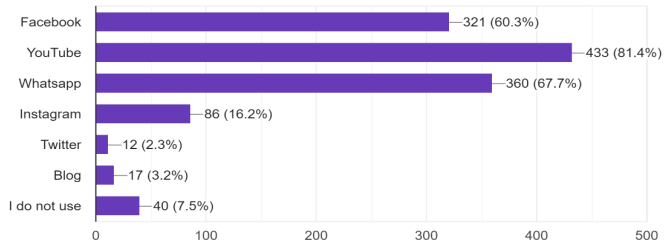
**Figure 4. Digital technology platforms used for religious communication**

Figure 4 presents information about popular media platforms used by the receptors for religious purposes. YouTube is the most used platform, followed by WhatsApp and Facebook.

Social media platforms are an effective tool for disseminating religious messages at times of social distancing. Do you agree?

Neutral
12.2%
Strongly disagree
1.7%
Disagree
2.4%

Strongly agree
42.5%
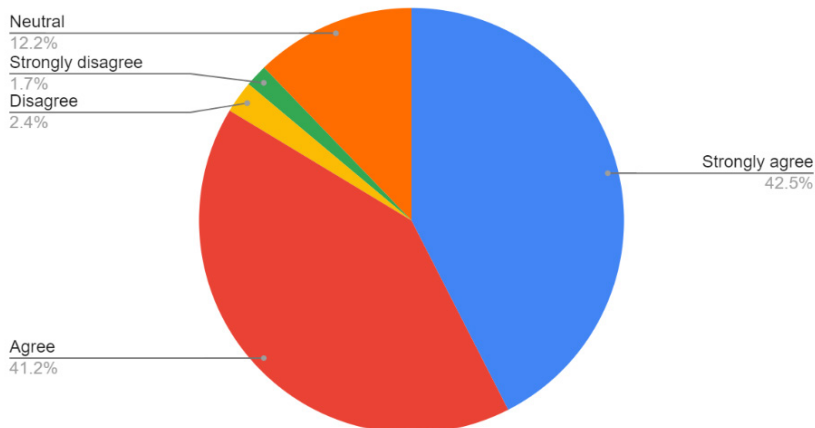
Agree
41.2%

**Figure 5. Effectiveness of digital technology for religious communication**

As seen from Figure 5, 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%) agrees that the current social situations have increased the usage of digital technology to meet their spiritual needs.

The laity population has 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 population admits that though they follow religion online, and they often prefer programs

by priests of their liking than 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 11: Do you think the authorities of the Catholic Church endorse the use of digital technology for religious purposes?**

| Yes | No | Only at times of emergencies | I do not know |
|---|---|---|---|
| 47.10% | 7.60% | 18.00% | 27.40% |

As per the Vatican web page '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 12: Will you continue to use digital technology platforms for attending religious services after the lockdown?**

| Age | Apart from Holy Mass, I will continue to use digital technology for religious purposes | I will continue using for all religious services | I will not use digital technology platforms for any religious purposes | Not applicable |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 15-25 | 60.11% | 20.22% | 9.84% | 9.84% |
| 25-35 | 55.15% | 24.85% | 10.30% | 9.70% |
| 35-45 | 66.32% | 18.95% | 12.63% | 2.11% |
| 45-55 | 60.42% | 20.83% | 12.50% | 6.25% |
| 55 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.
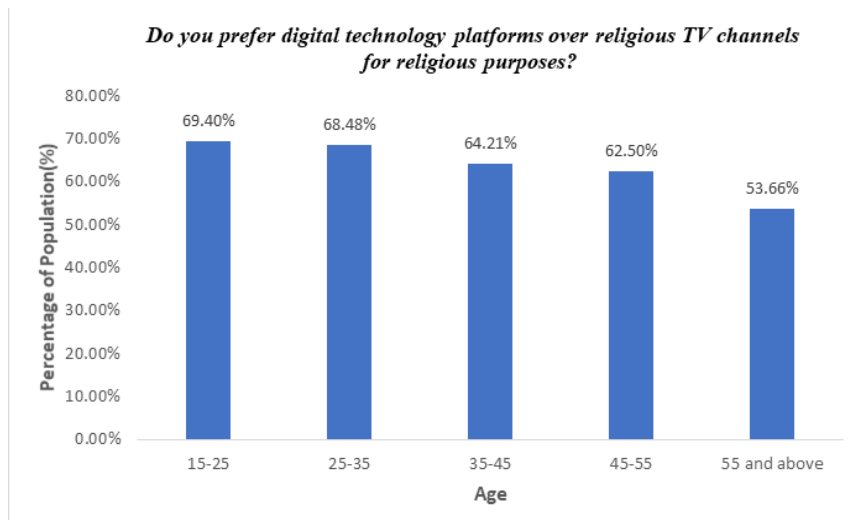


**Figure 6. Preference of streaming platform between Television and digital technology**

To understand the status of digital technology in religious communication further, the receptors were asked to choose their preferred media for religious communication. In addition to the above findings, it is noteworthy that the younger population shows more leniency (close to 70%) towards digital technology platforms, and the tendency decreases with age (Figure 6). The notable fact is that over 50% of the elder age group has also supported digital technology platforms. So, in general, it can be said that the community has a general tendency to shift towards digital technology usage for religious purposes.

## Discussions: Negotiations and Communal Framing in the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church

In order to corroborate with the survey results, the author collected data statistics from 'Social blade' (a global data statistics website that tracks the viewership of digital technology platforms). The received data showed an increased usage of online platforms for religious purposes, both by religious communicators and receptors of Kerala. There has been a significant increase in the frequency of streaming Holy Mass and specially arranged online conventions through every streaming platform. (The information is gathered from personal interviews that the author conducted with Directors of Goodness Television, Shalom Television and Shekinah Television). It can be predicted that the tendency would indicate a transition stage 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 Thomas.[29]

Cheong argues that though 'new media is vital for religious communication', an effective merging of the new mediations with the old communication practices ensures the effective evolution of media for religion.[30] 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 traditionality. The community is also keen on maintaining an offline-online balance in religious communication, as suggested by Campbell and Lovheim.[31]

[29] Günter Thomas, "The Mediatization of Religion – as Temptation, Seduction, and Illusion," *Media, Culture & Society* 38, no. 1 (2015): 37-47, doi:10.1177/0163443715615659.

[30] Pauline Hope Cheong, "The Vitality of New Media and Religion: Communicative Perspectives, Practices, and Changing Authority in Spiritual Organization," *New Media & Society* 19, no. 1 (2016): 25-33, doi:10.1177/1461444816649913.

[31] Mia Lövheim and Heidi A. Campbell, "Considering Critical Methods and Theoretical Lenses in Digital Religion Studies," *New Media &*

Although above 90% of both communicators and receptors were already familiar with the usage of digital technology platforms for religious purposes, the COVID-19 induced lockdown and social distancing have had a significant impact on the online behaviour of the community. The unprecedented social situations gave momentum to 'digital technology usage for religious purposes' by increasing the number of already existing users and by encouraging new users. Within a short period of two weeks, the survey was able to identify a ratio of 1 is to 8 for new communicators and a ratio of 1 is to 7 for the new receptors. Social distancing has indeed compelled the community to let go of any reservations they had against online religion. 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.[32]

The communicators and receptors are present in the digital technology platforms largely, but a nominal disparity is observed in terms of viewership. This can be attributed to a 'storied identity' characteristic of society.[33]The receptors choose whom to follow purely based on their personal interests due to the wide options available to them. Under the study population, receptors are mostly using the YouTube platform, while for the communicators, it is only the third option. The receptors prefer more established communicators and their YouTube channels. Moreover, there is a

*Society* 19, no. 1 (2017): 5-14, doi:10.1177/1461444816649911.

[32] Heidi A. Campbell and Oren Golan, "Creating Digital Enclaves: Negotiation of the Internet among Bounded Religious Communities," *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 5 (2011): 709-724, doi:10.1177/0163443711404464.

[33] David Yamane, "Awash in a Sea of Faith and Firearms: Rediscovering the Connection between Religion and Gun Ownership in America," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 55, no. 3 (2016): 622-636, doi:10.1111/jssr.12282.

gap of about 30 % between the communicators who support digital technology usage and those who think they are trained enough to do that. Again, the communicators are facing difficulty in gaining viewers while the receptor community liberally exercises their freedom to choose from available options.

Hence, it can be concluded that the phenomenon of 'digital religion' is posing many challenges to communicators. Not all communicators are competent enough to meet the needs of the receptors. This incompetency could be attributed to the fact that not many of them were required to do online religious communication before the social distancing phenomena. A possible solution to this is to ensure meticulous training for the communicators in both media and communication. This is in agreement with Hutchings when he emphasises the pivotal role played by religious communicators and hence the importance of training them to manipulate the opportunities provided by online platforms.[34]

The age-wise analysis gives us an important insight that the younger generation (25-45) has a prominent presence, as expected, but the older generation (45 and above) is not quite far behind. In the case of communicators, age has been a factor due to a lack of proficiency and adaptability issues. The fact that some of the members of the population have put in their own efforts to learn the technology is promising. The influence of the age factor is more evident among communicators because the level of proficiency required to be a communicator is higher than that to be a receptor. Furthermore, training gains relevance in the context of the instantaneous nature of online communication that could lead to unprecedented outcomes.

The traditionality of the community is reflected in their view of

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[34] Tim Hutchings, "Design and the Digital Bible: Persuasive Technology and Religious Reading," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 32, no. 2 (2017): 205-219, doi:10.1080/13537903.2017.1298903.

'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, religion does not allow the media to shape them passively; instead, religion tends to shape the new media.[35] 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 [4], 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 can be described as 'Induced online religion', clearly stating the role of a social event in inducing a shift in the religious habits of the community.

All these factors combined 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.

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[35] Heidi A. Campbell, "Review of *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* Ed. Heidi A. Campbell (Routledge, 2013)," *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 3, no. 2 (2014): 163-165, doi:10.1163/21659214-90000058.

## Conclusions: Induced Online Religion in Syro-Malabar Catholic Church

The recent COVID-19 outbreak induced lockdown and social distancing has encouraged 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 is increased use by the communicators (priests) for delivering religious practices and the receptors (believers) on digital technology platforms for meeting their religious needs.

Furthermore, the study enunciates the relevance of digital technology in catering to the religious void created in the minds of followers at times of distress, like the COVID-19 pandemic situation. Moreover, the investigation has given implications on the role of age and targeted training on the effectiveness of digital technology usage for religious purposes, especially with reference to the communicators (priests). The results become even more interesting in the context that the survey was done through an online platform. Though these people have the means to basic online access, not many of them, especially priests, are able to use media to its full potential.

The research finds that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on religious communication through online platforms, hence leading to a new phenomenon which we term as 'Induced online religion'. Induced online religion is a derived term from online religion as defined by Helland.[4] 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. Additionally, there is a probability that this trend is temporary and will go back to 'religion online' once the situations go 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 and to carry out a follow-up study to evaluate the longstanding effect of 'Induced online religion'.

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# Global Responses to Neighborhood Change in the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Philippine Church's Reception

*Rico C. Jacoba[1]*

## ABSTRACT

*Neighborhood change is historical, but in recent years this change has been afforded by Internet use.  With the rise of digital and wireless networks, face-to-face engagements in the neighborhood gave way to virtual reality. Recently, due to the COVID19 pandemic, this virtual reality was intensified. People need to adhere to rules and regulations that require them t distance themselves socially. Even Church activities in the physical Church were temporarily disrupted.  For the Church to thrive, strategies of communicating faith in the time of pandemics are necessary. This paper is a narrative presentation on how neighborhoods changed over time until COVID 19 pandemic. It will also present how the Church planners become creative to respond to the spiritual needs of the neighborhood Church. The aim of this paper is threefold. First is a narrative presentation of the different scholars' diverse approaches in studying neighborhood, from viewing it as simple "community" to a causal force in individual*

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*life chances to a lifestyle choice.[2] The second is a narrative discussion of how some selected faith-based communities reacted to neighborhood change in the global pandemic. The third aim is to present an overview of the Philippine Church's reception to neighborhood change during the pandemic.*

**Keywords:** *neighborhood, online-church, COVID 19 pandemic, online-communities*

I could still remember spending time playing games with our friends and neighbors. The games we loved to play back then seem irrelevant for this generation in the cyber context. For example, the favorite game, "Capture the Flag," is usually played with two teams consisting of six kids (sometimes adults also). Each team has its territory, and they use neighboring driveways and fences to mark borders. The game's objective is to secure the "flag" inside your territory while you aim to get the other team's flag. 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.[3] Kids in the classic neighborhood enjoy playing outdoors. Some other neighborhood games are Kick the Can, Steal the Bacon, Manhunt' Statue Maker, Ghost in the Graveyard, Bad Bunny,[4] and many others.

However, today we observed a radical change in the way neighborhood dynamics happen. From the Google App there is a downloadable popular android game known as "Hello Neighbor."[5] This

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[2] Ray Forrest, and Ade Kearns. "Social Cohesion, Social Capital and the Neighbourhood." *Urban Studies* 38, no. 12 (November 2001): 2125–43. https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980120087081.

[3] "The 8 Best Neighborhood Games" accessed December 19, 2020, https://www.scholastic.com/parents/family-life/parent-child/8-best-neighborhood-games.html

[4] For the explanation of these games please see: https://www.scholastic.com/parents/family-life/parent-child/8-best-neighborhood-games.html

[5] "Google Play," accessed December 19, 2020, accessed July 24,

game is a sneakiness fear game about sneaking into your neighbor's house to know what the horrible secrets he's hiding in the basement. You play against an advanced AI that learns from your every move. Players enjoy virtual climbing through the backyard window; however, expect a bear trap there. There is sneaking through the front door in the game, but there will be cameras there soon. 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. Based on an extensive literature review, I would argue that perspectives on neighborhood change. Hence, there is a tendency that we do not know neighborhoods when we see them. I agree with Martin's [6] claims that "we construct them for purposes of our research or social lives, based on common ideals of what we expect an urban neighborhood to be." Through research or social exchange, the neighborhoods we define are always subject to redefinition and contention; they are not self-evident.

The classical concept of the neighborhood has been redefined by an online network that has been "progressively prevalent and persuasive whizz (e.g., Facebook, Digg, YouTube)."[7] This widespread phenomenon has resulted in the emergence of an online neighborhood.[8] As a working definition in this paper, an online neighborhood may refer to "a cluster of people coherently interacting with one another. The interactions can be explicit (e.g., direct e-mail exchange between two users), or implicit (e.g., two users bookmark the same document)." This description of the online neighborhood reflects Garfinkel's notion of observable interactions.[9]

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2021https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.tinybuildgames. helloneighbor&hl=en&gl=US

[6] Deborah G. Martin, "Enacting Neighborhood," *Urban Geography* 24, no. 5 (2003): 361-385.

[7] Armin Ashouri Rad, "Three Essays on Dynamics of Online Communities" (PhD diss., Virginia Tech, 2016).

[8] Ai-Xiang Cui, Yan Fu, Ming-Sheng Shang, Duan-Bing Chen, and Tao Zhou, "Emergence of Local Structures in Complex Network: Common Neighborhood Drives the Network Evolution," *Acta Physica Sinica* 60, no. 3 (2011): 038901.

[9] Anne Warfield Rawls, "Harold Garfinkel, Ethnomethodology and Workplace studies," *Organization Studies* 29, no. 5 (2008): 701-732.

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, it is classified as temporally coherent. For example, people exchanging e-mails over a sustained period count as being temporally coherent. It is contextually coherent interaction "if they have similar interaction context: time, location, people or objects associated with the interaction."[10] When these dynamics of interaction are sustained, and gradually people become aware of the presence of each other, a community of neighbor begins to emerge.[11]

This phenomenon has 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 of it is that it creates group polarization. This group polarization 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's "separation may result in the domination of a social network by the dominant group."[12] Hence, an important pragmatic inquiry is how the undercurrents of user content group, consumption, and assessment will drive the formulation of shared or deviating perspectives online.[13]

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[10] Hari Sundaram, Yu-Ru Lin, Munmun De Choudhury, and Aisling Kelliher, "Understanding Community Dynamics in Online Social Networks: A Multidisciplinary Review," *IEEE Signal Processing Magazine* 29, no. 2 (2012): 33-40.

[11] Sundaram, et.al., "Understanding Community."

[12] Fieseler, Christian, and Matthes Fleck, "The Pursuit of Empowerment through Social Media: Structural Social Capital Dynamics in CSR-blogging," *Journal of Business Ethics* 118, no. 4 (2013): 759-775.

[13] Hazhir Rahmandad, "Understanding the Dynamics of Online Communities," Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA, United States, accessed December 17, 2020, https://grantome.com/grant/NSF/SES-1027413

The neighbor now has been confronted with the emergence of new cultural norms. Being neighbors to the "other/s" in the online context may lead to serious concerns like exposure to public opinion. Due to the nature of the online neighborhood, public opinion is central to online communities; with the growing proliferation of digital interactions, new questions and opportunities for the "other/s" as neighbors emerge. Specifically, the "other/s" needs to know and develop a method for supposing imprint (whether users have seen an item online) based on the need of the online community. An automated design is necessary to accommodate the assimilation of public opinion as the "other/s" interacts with their online neighbors.

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 the famous and charismatic. However, in the online neighborhood, the so-called techno-savvy individuals have a monopoly of power to influence and dictate public opinions as they engage in media. As a result, they create media content for public use (posting stories they find from the Internet), like their subjective perception. Many tend to convert more of the neighborhood members, further reducing the diversity of opinions expressed. The popular term for this is "trending." Trending topic detection is a fundamental building block to monitor and summarize information originating from social sources.[14]

## Neighborhood in the COVID 19

On March 12, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a pandemic. The Coronavirus outbreak led

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[14] Luca Maria Aiello, Georgios Petkos, Carlos Martin, David Corney, Symeon Papadopoulos, Ryan Skraba, Ayse Göker, Ioannis Kompatsiaris, and Alejandro Jaimes, "Sensing Trending topics in Twitter," *IEEE Transactions on Multimedia* 15, no. 6 (2013): 1268-1282.

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.[15]

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 continue exploring possibilities of caring for and reconnecting with their members, including     lost and distant neighbors.[16]

Since public worship in-person is 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.[17] 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 employ 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

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[15] Anna Durbanova, "How the Pandemic Is Pushing Religious Services Online," accessed October 7, 2020, https://impakter.com/how-pandemic-pushes-religious-services-go-online/

[16] Billy Graham Center, "COVID-19 Church Survey Summary Report: A collaborative effort by The Billy Graham Center's Send Institute, Exponential, Leadership Network, Catalyst, Discipleship.org, and ARC," (March 27, 2020): accessed July 20, 2021,  https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a8f6b73297114fa6883b8cd/t/5e80f4e5d5037c1157f02ded/1585509627969/COVID-19+Church+Survey+Summary+Report.pdf.

[17] Campbell, "The Distanced Church," 4.

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.[18] 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 cyberchurch. 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.[19] WHO discourages non-essential physical gatherings and organizes virtual gatherings through live-streaming, television, radio, social media, and other related activities.[20] The study by Lukasz Sulkowski and Grzegorz Ignatowski has confirmed that almost all Churches

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[18] Heidi A. Campbell, "What Religious Need to Consider When Trying to do Church Online," in *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*, 49-52, ed. Heidi A Campbell, (2020):51, accessed July 20, 2021, www.digitalreligion.tamu.edu.

[19] For terminology descriptions please refer to http://data.unaids.org/pub/report/2010/jc1786_fbo_en.pdf

[20] World Health Organization, "Interim guidance, 7 April 2020," accessed October 7, 2020, https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/practical-considerations-and-recommendations-for-religious-leaders-and-faith-based-communities-in-the-context-of-covid-9?gclid=CjwKCAjwq_D7BRADEiwAVMDdHs_3gW0spk_txk7R yObxsXVGONj7GypJtYeHgstz7qBUH5EouI6MxoCIHYQAvD_BwE.

and communities were ready to undertake some modifications in their worship practice, while others suspended or drastically reduced their religious practices.[21]

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 outbreak's start based on their local church traditions.[22] The Church Council of the Baptist Church suspended their Sunday services as they are 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 arise from neighbor's love. Augsburg and the Evangelical    Reformed Church expressed the same reason for the suspension. Their standard pronouncement underlines the concern for health, people's well-being, and the need to stymie the virus's spread. The suspension of offline celebrations did not hinder their connection with believers. Instead, they used technology to be interconnected using the Internet, social media, Facebook Live, live streaming, public television, radio, broadcasting, and YouTube.[23]

In a survey on how Church leaders respond to the COVID crisis, the sudden shift to digital technology may not be challenging for pastors in larger church communities as they go online even before the lockdown. However, small church pastors are 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

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[21] Lukasz Sulkowski and Grzegorz Ignatowski, "Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Organization of Religious Behaviour in Different Christian Denominations in Poland," *Religions* 11, 254 (2020): 6, doi:10.3390/rel11050254, www.mdpi.com/journal/religions

[22] Sulkowski and Ignatowski, "Impact of COVID-19."

[23] Sulkowski and Ignatowski, "Impact of COVID-19."

role in the conference is significant at 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)."[24] On the other end, teaching older congregation members how to use the 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.[25] On this aspect, the larger churches are also challenged to take the opportunity to be good neighbors to the small ones, as the tech-savvy pastors and younger generation are to the older congregants in using technology online for interconnectivity and religious services.[26] In support of his argument that the digital Church is here to stay, Niewhof 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).[27]

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[24] Steve Evoy, "The Unspectacular Pastor: Live and In Person," in *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*, 14-15, ed. Heidi A Campbell, (2020):13, accessed July 20, 2021, www.digitalreligion.tamu.edu.

[25] Aneya Elbert, "God Equips the Called", in *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*, 12-13, ed. Heidi A Campbell, (2020):13, accessed July 20, 2021,  www.digitalreligion.tamu.edu.

[26] Dein, Loewenthal, Lewis and Pargament, "COVID-19, Mental Health and Religion," 1-3.

[27] Carey Nieuwhof, "Digital Church Is Here to Stay," *Lewis Center for Church Leadership*, (April 29, 2020): accessed July 20, 2021,  https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/digital-church-is-here-to-stay/.

This pandemic crisis accelerated engagement with live streaming services. For Bogle, this current crisis 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."[28]

Failure to level up in 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."[29] He implied that, with digital technology, people reconnecting with the Church during this pandemic must maintain and sustain its presence in the digital space even after the pandemic for religious, social interconnectivity, and worship 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 - it leaves out other faithful members who cannot afford computers, TVs, smartphones, and no reliable internet connection. He further observed that even if people "view" the online services, a "significant percentage are not watching the whole thing."[30] However, he profoundly appreciates Zoom meetings or worships over Facebook Live, enhancing interaction among liturgical celebrations.

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[28] Albert Bogle, "Turning Flavor of the Month into Staple Diet," in The *Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*, 7-9, ed. Heidi A Campbell, (2020): 7-9, accessed July 20, 2021, www.digitalreligion.tamu.edu.

[29] Bogle, "Turning Flavor of the Month into Staple Diet," 9

[30] John Floberg, "The Challenges of Online in Indian Country and Rural America," in *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*, 17-18, ed. Heidi A Campbell (Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies, 2020), 17-18, accessed July 20, 2021, www.digitalreligion.tamu.edu.

David Silverkors (Parish Priest, Catholic Uppsala Diocese, Sweden) describes the general religious landscape in Europe, including Sweden, as such that people are increasingly disconnecting themselves from organized traditional religion. However, in Sweden, the worshiping community disconnected by the COVID pandemic seeks to go online 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 for reasons like health, lack of time, and geographical reasons.[31]

Stephen Garner (Dean and Lecturer in Theology at Laidlaw College, New Zealand) pictures the current 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 hard time connecting with their community members much more engaging creatively with the new technological skill. 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 a priest, Holy Communion that requires physical presence, anointing of the sick with oil requires physical contact with the infirm. The impossibility of translating these sacraments online causes anxiety among Church members, even with the alternative ways of broadcasting

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[31]  David Silverkors, "Four Lessons I've Learned So Far in the Wake of the Pandemic," in *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*,39-42, ed. Heidi A Campbell (Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies, 2020), 41-42, accessed June 10, 2021, www. digitalreligion.tamu.edu.

masses and the like. The recipients of these sacraments are also neighbors in the Christian community.[32]

Matthew John Paul Tan 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 ecclesial life's touchstone is anchored in the embodied communion and the parish's sacramental life. Furthermore, he said, "that a presence with nobody is no presence at all, and this applies to both my neighbor and my God."[33] However, he later realized his weakness and said, "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."[34] His realization is rooted 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.[35]

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[32] Stephen Garner, "The Distanced Church: Pragmatism, Creativity, and Rhythms of Life," in *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*,53-55, ed. Heidi A Campbell (Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies, 2020), 53-54, accessed June 10, 2021, www.digitalreligion.tamu.edu.

[33] Matthew John Paul Tan, "Communion in the Digital Body of Christ," in *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*,77-79, ed. Heidi A Campbell (Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies, 2020): 78, www.digitalreligion.tamu.edu.

[34] Tan, "Communion in the Digital Body of Christ," 77-78.

[35] Tan, "Communion in the Digital Body of Christ," 79

As an authority in communication within the church context, Moises Shardelotto[36] underlined the significance of the communication process in transmitting religious celebrations/worship online. For most religious groups, the default response is 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"[37]*(emphasis added).

Thus, he further reiterated, citing Campbell and Garner, that engaging in an online community is meant to augment, not replace, offline liturgical experience.[38] The current COVID-19 pandemic challenges digital literacy among pastors, as noted by a theology

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[36] "Moises Shardelotto is a Ph.D. in Communication Sciences, and Assistant Professor at Unisinos University, Brazil."

[37] Moisés Sbardelotto, "The (Re)Discovery of the Digital Environment for Living and Communicating the Faith," in *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*,71-73, ed. Heidi A Campbell (Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies, 2020), 72-73, accessed, July 20, 2021, www.digitalreligion.tamu.edu.

[38] Sbardelotto, "The (Re)Discovery of the Digital Environment," 73.

professor in New York, Katherine G. Schmidt. The transition to virtual ministry in some parishes may be easy as they have been engaged in live streaming and recording liturgical services before the crisis. Still, in some parishes, however, the pastors and lay ministers scrambled to transmit their distanced neighbor-parishioners' services. As noted by Campbell, this phenomenon resonates with an initial survey of over 1,500 pastors in America, which resulted in the finding that a significant percentage of pastors felt "forced" into transitioning online but later began to have a hand on the new technology.[39]

At this point, let it be recalled that in 2002, the Pontifical Council for Social Communication (PCSC) came out with a short document with a clear understanding of the "opportunities and challenges" of the Internet and with a recommendation that those involved in the Church ministries, beginning with Church leaders, get media education for use in the ministry. The Council then quoted Pope John Paul II's speech during the World Communication Day (1990): "Church leaders are obliged to use 'full potential of the computer age to serve the human and transcendent vocation of every person and thus to give glory to the Father from all good things come.'"[40] The issues of non-functional websites and broken links in parishes are more digital literacy, beginning with the seminary formation from a  theological perspective.

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[39]  Heidi A Campbell, "Religion Embracing and Resisting Cultural Change in a Time of Social Distancing," in *Religion in Quarantine: The Future of Religion in a Post-Pandemic World,* 9-13, ed. Heidi A Campbell (Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies, 2020), 10, accessed July 20, 2021, www.digitalreligion.tamu.edu.

[40]  John Paul II, "Message of the Holy Father John Paul Ii for the 24th World Communications Day:
The Christian Message in a Computer Culture"19910, accessed March 19, 2020, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_24011990_world-communications-day.html.

Schmidt recommended that digital life is not just an appendix to modern life's integral component.[41] The current pandemic seems to picture the frenzied pastors and ministers as "exiles" desperately needing technological reconnection in the present digital space. However, William-Duncan and Oliver (Rector of Episcopal Church and Teacher at Church Divinity School of the Pacific, California, respectively) figuratively made a positive note for pastors who are 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.[42]

In the United Kingdom, the COVID-19 lockdown prompted the churches to shift rapidly from offline services to virtual church services as in other countries worldwide, which was not the traditional practice by the major Christian religion in the UK. The spiritual life is 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, are closed by government intervention. The lockdown disrupted the routine of shared worship being present simultaneously in a commonplace

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[41]  Katherine G. Schmidt, "404 Error: The Digital Literacy Page Cannot Be Found," in *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*,74-76, ed. Heidi A Campbell (Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies, 2020), 74-76, accessed July 20, 2021, www.digitalreligion.tamu.edu.

[42]  Stacy Williams-Duncan and Kyle Matthew Oliver, "Reassessing Embodiment and Its Role in Developing Digital Literacies for Ministry," in *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*,82-86, ed. Heidi A Campbell (Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies, 2020), 84, accessed July 20, 2021, www.digitalreligion.tamu.edu.

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 serves as an extension of the Church (sacred and secular) is linked virtually to the congregants' home (secular space). Hence, creating 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 is the new geography of homes blurring the boundaries between the sacred and the secular, which challenges the pre-pandemic clear separation of spaces for worship and home, particularly in the UK. Since congregants' homes are transformed into spaces of worship, eventually, these have become 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."[43]

The various neighborhood churches engage 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. These services differ from professional broadcasting of worship so that they are not done in church buildings. Congregants are present together through experience and possibly also in time, but not in place. The setting for broadcasting is usually in churches amplified digitally to viewers in homes.[44]

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[43] John R. Bryson, Lauren Andres and Andrew Davies. "COVID-19, Virtual Church Services and a New Temporary Geography of Home," Royal *Dutch Geographical Society* Vol. 111, No. 3 (May 2020): 360-365, DOI:10.1111/tesg.12436

[44] Bryson and Davies, "COVID-19, Virtual Church Services," 361.

**The Philippine Church's Reception**

During the pre-pandemic (COVID-19) in the Philippines, the Feasts of All Saints' Day (November 1) and All Souls' Day (November 2), and the celebration of the Holy Week, are national holidays that call for a family and community and even national celebration. Culturally, the dead loved ones are considered dearly as still members of the family. Besides, Filipinos are family-centered people; family ties are among the most cherished values in Philippine culture. Thus, the Feasts of All Saints and All Souls call for family and community celebration as they honor the saints and pray for their dead. However, not all the time, many families are as others are working abroad land-based and sea-based, while others are on travel and in hospital. Aware of this reality, in 2011, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines established an online portal containing a collection of prayers for the dead for Filipinos worldwide to use as they pay respect for their dead at the cemetery or elsewhere, according to Pedro Quitorio (CBCP Media Director). The portal also contains catechesis and liturgical notes, letters, and homilies about the departed by Blessed Pope John Paul II on the Catholic Church's two significant feasts.

The portal also helps the techno-savvy younger generation understand All Saints' and All Souls' Day meanings and significance.  Besides, The CBCP tapped Facebook and launched an account, "Usapang Undas," that offers trivia about All Saints and All Souls' Day. During these two holidays, those absent in the family are brought home by the Church online digitally as they are the neighbors in cyberspace in the geographical divide.[45]

Mostly, online churches in the Philippines are linked to a concrete parish.  During the pre-pandemic, thousands or even

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[45]  Jocelyn R. Uy, "Church takes honoring the dead to cyber space," *Inquirer.net,* October 31, 2011, https://technology.inquirer.net/5829/church-takes-honoring-the-dead-to-cyber-space

millions of Christians (both Catholic and Protestants) flock to the different parochial churches to celebrate their liturgical practices. Catholics celebrate the Eucharist and listen to the Word of God. However, during the pandemic (COVID 19), because of border restrictions and health protocols implemented by the national and local authorities, many churches have resorted to live-streaming the Holy Mass to their congregations who are not physically able to celebrate it. The Philippine Church was not ready for this kind of modality; however, creativity was born out of the need of the faithful to celebrate religious rituals. The Internet has provided the space for this need, and Filipinos could cope and attend online Church services. Some churches and parishes have started streaming their Masses on their websites, Facebook pages, and YouTube channels, especially in urban areas.

Many churches online in the Philippines emerged, especially at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic when public gatherings, including religious activities, were canceled to stymie the spread of the coronavirus. The lockdown came just before the Holy Week celebration, one of the most significant moments for Filipino Christians, highlighting their commemoration of the passion, death, and resurrection of the Lord, a time of repentance and renewal of the faith. Starting with Palm Sunday, Holy Week is a much-embodied liturgical celebration of the faithful's community. However, the pandemic prevented such public gatherings for the first time. During the crisis, the lockdown and social distancing reversed movements from a community gathering to stay-at-home, from the physical Church to home church, from public worship to personal and family prayers, and from people going the local churches to homes via digital technology. The Catholic Church leaders in the Philippines heeded the Pope's message of the Pope, "Be very close to the people of God, make each one feel loved and accompanied, help everyone to perceive that the Church does not close its doors to anyone, but is concerned to make no little one

who risks life be forgotten."[46]

Priests and ministers initially utilized bricolages just to transmit religious services to the people. Churches transitioned from embodied local liturgical celebrations to virtual services. Masses and other religious services in Metro Manila and other urban cities were broadcasted on radio and television, live-streamed on the Internet, social media, Facebook Live, and YouTube Live. "Every diocese must therefore provide for the celebration of the Eucharist, other liturgical services and spiritual activities, transmitted live through the Internet, Television, or Radio. We should encourage the faithful to avail themselves of these and pray together in their homes as a family or in their small Christian communities (BECs)," Bishop Valles, Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CCP) noted.[47] However, while other sacramental celebrations are done virtually, Fr. Felloni of Novaliches, Quezon City, encouraged the faithful to receive the other sacraments that could not be transitioned virtually like a confession. He further challenged Church ministers to reflect and prepare meaningful services to prevent nominal Catholics from altogether abandoning their faith.[48]

One popular devotion of Catholics in the Philippines is the "Visita Iglesia," which entails visiting 14 churches on Holy Thursday and Good Friday during Holy Week. According to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, "Visita Iglesia Online" is meant initially for Filipinos residing "in non-Catholic countries, seafarers, the sick, and the homebound people to keep

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[46] Franz Sorilla IV, "The Catholic Church and Social Media During the Lenten Season and COVID-19 Pandemic," March 31, 2020, https://ph.asiatatler.com/society/lenten-season-2020-amid-covid-19.

[47] "Virtual religious gatherings amidst COVID-19," *BusinessWorld,* March 18, 2020, https://www.bworldonline.com/virtual-religious-gatherings-amidst-covid-19/.

[48] Sorilla IV, "The Catholic Church."

their faith alive."[49] Since physically visiting the neighboring churches is impossible under lockdown and social distancing orders, religious leaders tour them virtually through a website provided for the purpose. Those who attend Masses online and could not receive Holy Communion in the local Church will pray the Spiritual Communion Act. Furthermore, the tradition of *Pabasa,* the uninterrupted chanting of the Passion of Jesus Christ on Good Friday in churches, was uploaded as audio files on a website from where the faithful may download or listen. Instead of physically going through the Cross's Stations on Good Friday in or around the Church and undergoing an embodied retreat in a place, a podcast is also uploaded on a website for everyone.[50]

From the phone interviews *of BusinessWorld* with other religious groups during the lockdown, the Iglesia ni Cristo maintained their Sunday services but practiced social distancing. Simultaneously, according to Jacek, Jehovah's Witnesses spokesman, the Jehovah's Witnesses went to live streaming platform arrangements.[51] There are weekday and Sunday services on live streams from the Facebook page of Cebu Catholic Church mass schedule during the lockdown (YouTube Live, Facebook Live) like the Basilica Minore del Sto. Niño de Cebu Parish. Almost all parishes in major cities in the Philippines have Parish Facebook pages where parishioners can access the posted schedules and participate online.[52]

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[49] Vince Nonato, "COVID-19 Empties Churches, But Holy Week Rites Continue Online," April 9, 2020, https://www.onenews.ph/covid-19-empties-churches-but-holy-week-rites-continue-online.

[50] Nonato, "COVID-19."

[51] Nonato, "COVID-19."

[52] Hazel Lumbre, "Churches Around The Philippines Are Livestreaming Masses Online During COVID-19 Period," April 01, 2020, https://thesmartlocal.com/philippines/churches-livestream-mass/; www.facebook.com; www.google.com; www.youtube.com; www.twitter.com

Realizing that Church leaders have limited technical skills and resources, a parish in Tacloban City, Leyte, Philippines, took the initiative to engage eight young men and women of the Redemptorist Media Ministry in the city to undergo an introductory course on online writing, photography, and video production. These young missionaries were trained last July 2020 as "cyber missionaries" with the goal "to bring God in all our posts"[53] and "to continue the work of evangelization 'via different media platforms and reach out to many people."[54] Challenged by the pandemic, Fr. Edwin Bacaltos assured that the Church's Social Media Apostolate must be strengthened. The parish initiative must be taking the right direction, knowing that Filipinos are the "world's number one social media users."[55]

With the lockdown, social/physical distancing, stay-at-home orders from the government worldwide, the Church of different traditions does not close its doors to believers searching for social and religious interconnections. The Church creatively makes its presence in cyberspace by navigating the digital technology to reconnect to members and other neighbors who may be detached, separated, and isolated from their embodied religious experience in a physical place of worship. The offline to online service transition revealed religious groups' essentials and embodiment in offline and online presence.

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[53] "Remarks from Sr. Praxedes Paloma of Paulines Media Center."

[54] "Remarks from Fr. Edwin Bacaltos, CSsR, rector of Tacloban Redemptorist Church," July 20, 2020, https://www.sunstar.com.ph/article/1864138/Tacloban/Local-News/Tacloban-Catholic-parish-trains-cyber-missionaries.

[55] Ronald O. Reyes, "Catholic parish in central Philippines trains 'cyber-missionaries'," July 20, 2020, https://philippines.licas.news/2020/07/20/catholic-parish-in-central-philippines-trains-cyber-missionaries/

## Concluding Remarks

The pandemic changed the lives of people all over the world, including that of Filipinos. Being the largest Christian country in Asia, the Philippines faced unprecedented challenges in the neighborhood change brought by the COVID 19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic forced us to pause, rethink, and be more creative in expressing our neighborliness. The unexpected neighborhood change has forged various policy pronouncements from the government-led Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) on Emerging Diseases and the Church-led Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP). With church gatherings playing a vital role in Christianity in the Filipino culture, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic caused challenges to public religious practices. Noticeable, too, is the shift to using social communications to do ministry. Many institutions have become more visible and active on social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube, harnessing those platforms' potential in reaching out to their neighbors, collaborators, and other partners. At the same time, together with the change to online worship,  many formation sessions, webinars, and even recollections and retreats have also shifted online. With all these changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, will the Philippine Church be ready to embrace the new modalities of becoming a Church, that is, a Church online? Will Filipino Christians be ready to embrace the shift from a traditional parochial church to a cyberchurch as a neighborhood church?  As the Servant of God Paul VI noted, "the condition of the society in which we live obliges all of us therefore to revise methods, to seek by every means to study how we can bring the Christian message to modern society."[56] The Church has the duty

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[56] Pope Francis, "Address to members of the 13th Ordinary Council of the General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops," (Consistory Hall Thursday, 13 June 2013), par 2, accessed June 10, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco_20130613_xiii-consiglio-sinodo-vescovi.html.; cf. Discourse to the Sacred College of Cardinals, 22 June 1973; L'Osservatore Romano English edition 5 July 1973, p. 6.

of creating new ways of interpreting and communicating the Gospel to make it relevant and meaningful for the daily experiences of the human person. This was reiterated by Pope Francis on May 2014 when he addressed the participants in the meeting of the *Pontifical Mission Societies*, saying that "[E]evangelizing at this time of great social transformation requires a missionary Church impelled to go forth, capable of discerning how to deal with various cultures and peoples' visions."[57]

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[57] Pope Francis, "Address to participants in the meeting of the Pontifical Mission Societies," (Clementine Hall Friday, 9 May 2014), paragraph 3, accessed June 10, 2020, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140509_pontificie-opere-missionarie.html.

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# Religious Social Capital and Support in the Social Integration of Catholic Migrants in Vietnam

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**ABSTRACT**

*Recent developments in studying religion and social capital have heightened the need for clarifying the role of religious social capital in the social integration of migrants. However, this topic is still undocumented in Vietnam. This is the first study to explore how religious social capital can support migrants to integrate into the host society in Vietnam. The mixed-method design analyzes quantitative data from 856 Catholic migrants and qualitative data, including 21 in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions with Catholic migrants. The research findings further support the idea that religious institutions can create networks of mutual support. The migrants can seek aid and help others during difficult times based on trusted relationships between parish members. However, the internal cohesion of sub-groups of migrants creates social exclusion for other migrants.*

**Keywords:** *Religious Social Capital, Catholic Migrants, Social Integration, Vietnam*

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## Introduction

Religion has been increasingly recognized as one of the resources for the creation and maintenance of social capital. Religion and social capital have been an object of research since the beginning of the 21st century until now (Pickel and Sammet 2012; Gelderblom 2018; Wuthnow 2002; Sakurai and Terazawa 2012; Norris et al. 2012; Kaasa 2015; Furbey et al. 2006; Hills, Plummer, and Carstensen 2007; Park and Bowman 2015; Swart 2017; Bramadat 2005; Deller, Conroy, and Markeson 2018; Fox et al. 2021; Williams 2008). Recent developments in studying religion and social capital have heightened the need for clarifying the role of religious social capital in the social integration of migrants (Fresnoza-Flot 2010; Ambrosini, Bonizzoni, and Molli 2021; Le et al. 2016; Karimshah, Chiment, and Skrbis 2014). A growing literature has shown that religious social capital can be a key component of social integration. Participating in the religious network can facilitate social inclusion or hinder social exclusion (Otiso 2020; Conner 2019; Egan 2014; García-Muñoz and Neuman 2012). Otiso (2020) indicated that the role of religion in migrants' social integration depends on the religion's position within the host society. Therefore, there are many ways to explain the religion's participation in migrants' life at the destination.

Despite much academic research exploring the relationship between religious social capital and migrant's social integration in the world, this topic is still undocumented in Vietnam. What we know about Catholic migrants in Vietnam is largely based upon studies on the 1954 migration of Catholics after the Geneve Accords (21 July 1954) (Nguyen 2010b, 2010a, 2014, 2015; Hansen 2009). Recently, there are some empirical studies surveyed on the demographic characteristics and the religious practice of current Catholic migrants (Hoang, Dao, and Nguyen 2021; Hoàng Thu Hương and Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Anh 2019).

In regards to Vietnamese Catholic migrants, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam (CBCV) has considered the pastoral care of migrants as one of their official pastoral activities since 2007. The Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants issued the Pastoral Guidelines for Migrants in 2017 to require the local churches to help migrants live out their faith in the host society and ask migrants to join local parishes. The increase in the Catholic Church's pastoral activities for migrants raises an important question about how religious social capital can support migrants to integrate into receiving cities in Vietnam. Therefore, the current study focuses on: 1) Examining how migrants' religious social capital is formed; 2) Analyzing the support of religious social capital for migrants to integrate into the host society, and 3) Exploring the negative effect of religious social capital in migrants' social integration.

## Religious Social Capital

Since Bourdieu introduced social capital in his work *The Forms of Capital* (1986), there have been many different definitions and explanations of social capital. Bourdieu (1986, 21) identified social capital as having two components, including group membership and social networks: "Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group." Unlike Bourdieu, Putman argued that social capital consists of networks, norms, and trust (Putnam 1994). Studying social capital, both authors emphasized the component 'networks' of social capital.

In the early studies of social capital, the role of religion and religious networks for social capital received little attention due to the secularism that dominated the early 20th century in the West. Since the late 20th century, researchers have found that religion

still plays an important role in modern societies. The concept of religious capital has been emerging since the 1990s and is used as a means to explore the role of religious participation in economic development (Barker 2007, 2008). The idea of religious capital came from Iannaccone's new model of religious participation based on the human capital approach. He defined religious capital attached to a religion's doctrines, rituals, traditions, and members could increase one's satisfaction from religious participation and the likelihood of religious participation (Iannaccone 1990, 299). After that, Rod Stark and Roger Finke revised Iannaccone's concept of religious capital and indicated that "*religious capital consists of the degree of mastery of and attachment to a particular religious culture*" (Stark and Finke in Finke 2003, 3). A novel concept of religious social capital has emerged in some studies over recent ten years (Maselko, Hughes, and Cheney 2011; Williams 2008; Pickel and Sammet 2012; Swart 2017). Religious social capital "*is defined as the social resources available to individuals and groups through their social connections with a religious community*" (Maselko, Hughes, and Cheney 2011, 759).

The concept of religious social capital has to date been applied in studying the influence of religious participation on various aspects of social life. Sakurai and Terazawa (2012) mentioned that in Japanese society, religion has the social capital, and religious networks can provide social services and promote the link between religious groups and outside groups. Other authors found that religion played the role of bridging and bonding capital for college students in America (Park and Bowman 2015). In the previous studies, religion has been considered as both bridging capital and bonding capital. Therefore, religious social capital can be used as a means to explore the influence of social relationships establishing in the religious context on migrants' social integration.

In general, religious capital refers to people's engagement to religion, and to religious activities. At the same time, religious social

capital refers to people's social relationships when participating in religion. In the current study, the religious social capital is considered a migrants' social resource that is formed through the religious participation and included social networks and social trust in their communities.

## Religion and the Social Capital of Migrants

Being a member of a religious group means individuals can access the religious network and gain religious social capital. Thus, faith is one of the sources of social capital for migrants. The faith community can build bridging and linking social capital by providing services for both their members and the wider community (Furbey et al. 2006). Additionally, the reciprocal relationship based on trust and reciprocity in the faith community facilitates civic integration (Hopkins 2011). In the study about the influence of religion on small business activity in U.S counties, Deller et al. (2018) showed that by attending rituals, small bussiness people could not only build bonding social capital but also create bridging social capital[2]. These social capital bring the opportunities for them to share and provide information.

Ambrosini et al. (2021) studied immigrants from six Catholic and Protestant churches in Milan, Italy, and assumed that social capital was acquired through church activities. They found that all of the churches within the study have a complex social life outside of worship. Newcomers can find mutual recognition and establish safe and stable relationships in religious communities.

In short, through social capital sources such as trust and social networks, migrants have connections to support each other in finding jobs, housing, churches, entertainment, and other services.

[2] In their study, the bonding social capital refered to "networks, norms and trusts *within* a given situation", and the bridging social capital mentioned to "networks, norms and trusts *across* institutions" (Deller et.al, 2018: 2-3)

Religious communities become a context in which social capital is built and used for migrants' social integration.

## Christianity and Social Integration

Social integration refers to the quantity and strength of interconnections among the constituent parts of a social unit. There are many types of social units such as individuals, groups, organizations or communities, and society (Münch 2001, 7591). Applying this definition to migrants, migrants' social integration "can be defined as the process by which migrants become accepted into society, both as individuals and as groups" (IOM 2011, 51).

Religious organizations have a role to play in connecting immigrants to community services in the receiving society. Ecklund et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative study of 33 Chinese immigrants to the United States, including first and second-generation immigrants, to explore the link between religion and public life after migration. The study focused on Buddhist, Catholic, and non-religious groups. Research results showed that immigrants all confirmed the institutional link between religion and politics in the United States. Most of the narrative respondents revealed that in the United States, being a conservative Christian was an advantage to be elected to political office. Congregations offered Catholics the opportunity to serve the community, support the laity, and guide the practice of political debate. For example, the church provided an explanation about the candidates when the elections came around. However, Buddhists strongly opposed faith-based community services and emphasized developing intrinsic ethical elements for motivating service to others (Ecklund et al. 2013, 209). Analyzing the non-religious groups, these authors found that these groups were interested in the role of religious organizations in implementing volunteer activities. Because non-religious people who want to help others found that the easiest way to do community service was through a religious organization. Through the initial

findings from this qualitative study, the authors believe that it is necessary to expand the study on the relationship between religion and civic life.

Explaining the role of religion as an important resource for immigrants at the receiving societies, Cox argued that the presence of religion in the early stages of resettlement helps migrants withstand shocks in the new destination. They need to find co-religious people to share their problems. Religious leaders act as counselors, and religious organizations act as sources of material support. Meanwhile, religious centers are suitable places to distribute social welfare (Cox 1983). Participating in activities at churches helps migrants integrate more easily. The church is a channel to establish trusting relationships (Ambrosini, Bonizzoni, and Molli 2021), promoting social cohesion through services and philanthropic activities for migrants and disadvantaged groups (Cnaan and Boddie 2002; Ambrosini, Bonizzoni, and Molli 2021). Religious institutions provide a psychological ballast as they help to alleviate the traumas of early settlement and frequent encounters with discrimination by gathering immigrants and creating networks of mutual supports with co-ethnics (Foner and Alba 2008).

Although many authors have found that religion can be a bridge for migrants to integrate into the host society, other authors have realized that religion hinders migrants' social integration in some cases. Drawing on an extensive range of literature, Sarli & Mezzetti (2020) realized that in North America, the cultural landscape of the U.S. created conditions for religion to foster migrants' integration. While, in Western Europe, the secularization and state-church relations made religion an obstacle for the social inclusion of Muslim migrants in host societies. Conner (2019) conducted a case study of a multicultural, nondenominational Christian church in Dublin, Ireland, and realized that the differences in religious belief could establish identity boundaries between Irish-born non-congregants and immigrants. Therefore, religious differences can be a roadblock

in the integration process of migrants in Irish society. Similarly, Otiso (2020) indicated that rejection and discrimination based on religious identities might lead to barriers in integrating East African Protestant Christian immigrants in Finland.

In Vietnam, the Catholic Church officially established the Committee on the Pastoral Care of Migrants in 2007 to help Catholic migrants maintain their religious lives in the host society. Since then, in all dioceses across the country, many associations for migrants have been formed, such as the Migration Pastoral Board, the association of fellow countrymen, the Catholic Action Groups (CAGs). These association activities are various and attract many Catholics. Thus, they play important roles in connecting Catholic migrants with their communities in the host city and building their social network. However, the questions about the support of Catholic associations to migrants at the host city and migrants' social network have been still unexplored particularly. The following sections move on to the research methods and findings to answer these questions.

**Methods**

The data for this article include secondary data collected from existing studies on Catholic migrants and primary data from a questionnaire survey of migrant Catholics in 3 cities: Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), and Bien Hoa (Dong Nai province). Each city has unique economic, social, and religious characteristics. Hanoi and HCMC are two typical cities presenting to the North and the South of Vietnam. Two cities have the fastest population growth rates (World Bank 2011) and a large number of migrants (GSO and UNDP 2016) in the country. Meanwhile, Bien Hoa, an average city located near HCMC, is famously known as one of the Catholic emigration destinations to the South in 1954. Besides, the two regions with the largest number of Catholics in the country are HCMC and Dong Nai, while Hanoi is the city with the highest

percentage of Catholic adherents in the Northern Delta (The Central Steering Committee for Population and Housing Census 2019).

Specifically, the article analyzes quantitative data from 856 Catholic migrants, including intra-urban migration and migration from other provinces/cities at three cities, and qualitative data, including 21 in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions with Catholic migrants mainly in Hanoi.

## Results

### *The formation of migrants' religious social capital*

One of the critical components of social capital is the network, which is established by linking individuals with other people in their community. The church is an excellent place for people to connect with others sharing the same faith. For Catholics, wherever they move, they must keep their faith by attending liturgies at any parish's church. The current study shows two ways of creating social capital for migrants: participation in religious liturgies and participation in parish activities.

Firstly, religious social capital is formed by participating in religious liturgies in the church parish. When asking the participants about the distance from their residence to the parish after migrating, the majority stated that they chose the parish, which was convenient for traveling (79.2%). On average, the distance from the residence to the parish was 3.35 km (Std = 3.8). The migrants' parish selection at the receiving city suggests that they looked for a convenient church to maintain their religious practices.

Indeed, in response to the question about the frequencies of the participation in these liturgies: Masses, Eucharist, and Reconciliation, over 96% of respondents reported that they fully practiced the two sacraments Eucharist and Reconciliation, yearly. 29.6% of those

interviewed indicated that they attended the Sunday Mass every week, while 67.7% attended one to three times a month.

Most of the Catholic liturgies are community activities. Therefore, religious participation lets migrants meet the parish priest and other Catholics. In other words, they have opportunities to connect to others or join the religious network.

Secondly, the CAG is a channel to establish social capital. Catholic Action is "the organized work of the laity that is performed under the direction or mandate of a bishop in the fields of dogma, morals, liturgy, education, and charity" (Britannica 2019). In Vietnam, there are two major CAGs: 1) Specialized Catholic Action organizations open to members of specific criteria such as gender, age, profession, or interest; and 2) General Catholic Action organizations open to all Catholics. According to incomplete statistics, in 2016, there were over 500,000 people involved in various Catholic Action Groups in Vietnam. Many people join more than one association simultaneously (Bp. Anphong Nguyễn Hữu Long 2018). CAGs have met the moral needs of Vietnamese Catholics because CAGs' activities pertain to social justice, charity, education, and culture. Therefore, CAGs have a significant role in preserving and revitalizing ethical values. Besides, some CAGs have done evangelization activities that bring many people to God. These groups meet, dialogue, and lead people, especially those who are non-religious or who are new to Catholicsm, to God, and the Church.

In addition, the Catholic Church's Decree on the Apostolate of the laity regulates that "the faithful should participate in the apostolate by way of united effort" and "the laity have the right to found and control such associations, and to join those already existing" (Vatican II 1965 Chapter 4). Therefore, participating in CAGs is the right and obligation of all Catholics.

Surveys in several parishes show that parishes have different numbers of CAG. Established for about two years, a new parish

(Trung Chi Parish in Hanoi) has nine CAGs. Larger parishes, such as Thai Ha parish in Hanoi and Binh Thuan parish in Ho Chi Minh City, have 26 and 24 CAGs, respectively. Parishes in Vietnam have both types of CAGs: 1) general CAGs such as Our Mother of Perpetual Help (*Hoi Duc Me Hang Cuu Giup*), Anna's Group (*Hoi Anna*), Group of Scrap Collection (*Hoi ve chai*), the Church Choir (*Ca doan*), etc.; and 2) specialized CAGs such as Eucharistic Youth Group (*Thieu nhi Thanh the*), Young Families Group (*Gia dinh tre*), Group of Patriarch (*Hoi gia truong*), Monica Group (*Hoi Monica – Gioi Hien m*au), etc.

The survey results showed that 43.1% (369/856 Catholic migrants) participated in at least one CAG. On average, participants joined 1.74 CAGs (Sd=1.29).

**Table 1: The situation of joining Catholic Action Groups (%)**

| No | Catholic Action Groups | Percentage/ Survey Sample (n=856) | Percentage/ CAGs' participants (n=369) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Groups relating to liturgical activities (choir, trumpet team, offerings, prayer, etc) | 17.5 | 40.7 |
| 2 | Charity Associations | 9.9 | 23.0 |
| 3 | Service Groups (flower arrangement, cleaning, altar decoration) | 3.6 | 8.4 |
| 4 | Educational Groups (students, parents) | 8.6 | 20.1 |
| 5 | Groups relating to communication activities | 2.1 | 4.9 |
| 6 | Catholic Association of fellow-countrymen | 11.7 | 27.1 |
| 7 | Group of Catholic Migrants | 14.0 | 32.5 |

| 8 | Other Catholic Groups | 5.3 | 12.2 |
|---|---|---|---|

It can be seen that Catholic migrants participated in many different groups, in which two types of groups with the highest percentage of respondents participating are groups related to liturgical activities and groups of migrants.

The qualitative data demonstrates that priests are the key players in attracting migrants to liturgical celebrations to establish a migrant community. Talking about this issue, one interviewee said:

> *The priests had to make many sacrifices to find migrants and ask for their contact numbers. People who came from the countryside did not know anything. If they had high religiosity in their countryside, they would go to church for liturgical celebrations. The less religious people easily give up liturgical celebrations after migration if they do not know where the church is. Therefore, the Priest set up a group for migrant families to call everyone and help their children keep their faith.* (Female, 55 years old, Thai Ha parish, Ha Noi)

To examine the meaning of participation in CAGs, Catholic migrants were asked to talk about what they received when joining CAGs. The results are below:

**Table 2: The meaning of participation in CAGs for Catholic Migrants**

| No | The meaning of participation in CAGs (n=368) | Percentage(%) |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Having more social relationships | 56.5 |
| 2 | Increasing the frequencies of liturgical celebrations | 32.9 |

| 3 | Feeling psychological support when facing difficulties in life | 38.0 |
|---|---|---|
| 4 | Receiving material support when facing difficulties in life | 8.2 |
| 5 | Receiving support relating to business | 10.3 |
| 6 | Feeling happier and more confident in life | 72.8 |
| 7 | Having opportunities to serve the community | 44.6 |

*Source: Calculated from the survey funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (grant number 504.01-2019.01)*

Over 70% of those who participated in CAGs indicated that the most significant benefit they received from joining CAGs was gaining positive feelings towards life. A Catholic migrant shared their experience when participating in CAG as follows:

> *I felt better when I participated in this group. I got rid of a lot of bad habits and interests. I had used to be a gambler, but I decided to stop. A Catholic sister's advice made me rethink, and I loved my family and the people around me more. I helped others more.* (Male, 33-year-old, Tam Hai parish, HCMC)

The next significant benefit included widening social relationships and having opportunities to serve the community, with 56.5% and 44.6%, respectively. A small number of those interviewed suggested that they received material support as well as support relating to job's assistance. One respondent said that he received the help from his co-religious people as follows:

> *In the parish, there was a grocery store. The grocery store's owner helped me by selling my products. Others in the parish could buy to help us.* (Male, 36 years old, Co Nhue Parish, Ha Noi)

In general, CAGs enable migrants to join the religious networks. This network serves as the source of migrants' religious social capital. However, migrants cannot create a religious network for themselves. At the destination, they are strangers and face considerable difficulties in their lives. Thus, the parishes' migrant pastoral care program is essential for them to begin a new life and participate in the activities at the new parish. In the beginning period, the parish pastors are the most important people in creating religious networks for migrants. When the religious network has been established, the members can help to maintain and widen it.

### The religious social capital support migrants to integrate into the host society

*Religious social capital brings trusted relationships for migrants*

Religion serves as a bridge between strangers. It provides opportunities for those who share similar religious beliefs to form a group and establish close relationships through religious activities. Furthermore, married migrants taking their children to church to study catechism is an opportunity for parents to meet, engage in conversation, and discover common interests. We conducted a group discussion with a group of young families at Trung Chi parish. This group consists of migrants living in Hanoi for at least ten years; all were married and had stable jobs. Some families owned homes in the city, but the majority still lived in rented accommodations. Since two years ago, Trung Chi parish has become more active after it was officially designated as a parish and was assigned a new assistant priest. As part of the parish's pastoral program, the pastor created groups for families with children who were at the eligible age to study the catechism. Young parents working full-time find time to take their children to church on Sundays to study catechism because they share the same desire to educate their children in the faith. Most of the mothers who converted to Catholicism upon marriage took their children to church, learned catechism with their children,

and supported the catechists in the task of teaching. Moreover, after a year of joining, these mothers were invited to become "assistants" or collaborators in catechesis teaching. For example, one interviewee said:

> I have been married for 12 years. I had three children after getting married. I did not let my baby go to church during the first month because he was still young. But the following month of my three offsprings, I took all of my three children to go to Mass and study catechism when they were old enough. Sister Sang encouraged me and was supportive when I took my children to church. It has been four years since I went to study catechism with my kids. (Female, 35 years old, Trung Chi Parish, Ha Noi)

Young parents have a chance to encounter other parents in catechism. They often found that they were of the same age, and had similar hobbies and interests, so they connected with each other and invited others to join the group. As a result, 20 families have come to participate in the young family group. Like other CAGs in the parish, the pastor of Trung Tri Church dedicates one Mass for them once a month, and they take part in reading the Gospel and singing in the Mass.

> Our group frequently communicate with each other on Zalo, Facebook and even chat to midnight. In addition, we have a common fund for the group from donations of people. This fund is used to buy flowers, candles and organize other group activities. The Priest celebrates a thanksgiving liturgy every month for our group. Because of our migration, we need encouragement from the pastor and the people in the group. A minority have bought a house in Ha Noi, but others still rent a house. So, those who have a stable life can support other people in the group. (Female, 37 years old, Trung Chi Parish, Ha Noi)

Participating in Catholic groups helps migrants strengthen their faith, work, and experiences. Thus, they can help each other in challenges. Talking about these issues, some interviewees commented as follows:

*We help each other in our work and reinforce our faith. For instance, if anybody wanted to rent a shop to trade, we would help find a store and shared experiences in trading for them.* (Male, 30 years old, Thai Ha Parish, Ha Noi )

*When I was in trouble, I sought the aid of the group's leader. Moreover, specifically, he helped me so much. When I opened a shop for the first time, I told him about my adversities and asked to borrow his money. I also borrowed money from others in the group to support my business. After a period of time, I earned money from my work and repaid them with thanks* (Male, 34 years Thai Ha Parish, Ha Noi)

The church fosters multiple trusting relationships, such as the relationship between the priests/sisters and migrants, migrants and local community, and relationships among the migrants themselves. Upon arriving at a new place, migrants place their trust in the help of priests and the fellow faithful. Indeed, religious networks serve as bridges to connect strangers to become close associates willing to help others. The following comments by the interviewees demonstrate this sentiment:

*In terms of my spiritual life, I relied on the priests and sisters. I told them about my health and family because my family was acquainted with some priests and sisters.* (Female, 32 years old, Co Nhue Parish, Ha Noi )

*The parish also had a religious sister in my homeland, and she introduced me to my accommodation in Ha Noi. When I moved to Hanoi, I called the religious sisters who had been introduced to me, and they sent a student to pick me up.* (Female, 19 years old, Co Nhue Parish, Ha Noi)

*Life was difficult, but I had religious sisters and friends who had the same beliefs help me a lot.* (Female, 20 years old, Co Nhue Parish, Ha Noi)

Furthermore, group leaders have an essential role in encouraging

new migrants to participate in liturgical celebrations. One interviewee shared as follows:

> *In the hostel I lived, there were a lot of Catholic brothers. If everybody did not go to Mass, I knocked on their doors and asked people to go with me. Sometimes they felt bothered, but if they did not go to Mass, I would call to their parents or the parish priest in the countryside.''* (Male, 33-year-old, Tam Hai parish, HCM city)

In retrospect, linking migrants to local communities in the host society, religious activities, and CAGs establish trusted relationships in the parish community. In the religious networks, migrants can trust not only priests, religious sisters but also fellow faithful. These individuals become rich sources of social capital for migrants. The following section will present some of the findings on how religious social capital can support the social integration of migrants.

### Religious network and social support for Catholic migrants in the social integration process at the host society

In the process of social integration into the host society, Catholic migrants face many challenges. This current study shows that migrants receive support services from their religious network. In response to the question, "What did you receive from your faith groups or faith community when you face difficulties in life?" a range of responses was elicited as follows:

**Table 3: Support services from Catholic communities for migrants**

| No | Support services (n=458) | Percentage(%) |
|----|--------------------------|---------------|
| 1 | Borrow a vehicle | 26.9 |
| 2 | Loan of money | 29.8 |
| 3 | Babysitting | 15.1 |
| 4 | Information about applying to schools | 15.9 |
| 5 | Legal support and consultation | 9.8 |

| 6 | Help for medical treatment/care for the sick | 15.9 |
| 7 | Introduction to more social relationships | 28.2 |
| 8 | Promote products and services for migrants | 8.5 |
| 9 | Marriage and family counseling | 10.0 |
| 10 | Prayer for individual/family when facing difficulties | 60.2 |

*Source: Calculated from the survey funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (grant number 504.01-2019.01)*

The survey results show that just over half of the respondents reported that they received at least one form of assistance. Among these, 60.2% indicated that praying for individuals/families was the most prominent form of support in times of difficulty. Catholics maintain the belief that God's answers to prayers would help people overcome obstacles in life. Hence, group prayer increases a sense of trust when members share their vulnerabilities and offer to pray for each other during challenging times.

The results show that those in need of a loan or a vehicle constituted nearly 30% of those who received assistance. These help migrants who still experience difficulties stabilizing their lives and jobs in the host society. These acts of assistance are entirely free and based on mutual trust between individuals of the same religious faith. This willingness by individuals to provide material assistance to one another reveals the existence of trusted relationships within the Catholic community.

Another substantial assistance for Catholic migrants is the introduction to open more social relationships. The religious network allows migrants to connect with others and obtain information helpful to their work or life. Social interactions with community members help migrants to integrate into life at the host city gradually. Some interviewees shared,

*I joined many activities at the parish. For example, I helped to make caves at Christmas, cleaned up the table after parties. The more activities I joined, the more people I met* (Male, 34 years old, Thai Ha Parish, Ha Noi).

*Some non-Catholic people in my hometown also joined our Hien Xuan Duc group's activities; for example, they participated in our liturgies, sports activities, or parties* (Male, 26 years old, Thai Ha Parish, Ha Noi).

*My group was a special thing that those who were not religious could join. My group has a non-Catholic girl, but she participated in all church activities, knew all the Fathers and Sisters, and helped Catholic students do their projects. Many non-Catholic people joined our activities, even though they didn't live in the same hometown as us* (Female, 19 years old, Co Nhue Parish, Ha Noi).

Support in a religious network is usually reciprocal. A member of the network who has received help when facing difficulty, in turn, provides help to others on a different occasion. In the study population in Hanoi, the qualitative data indicated that CAGs have a fund raised by the members' contributions to be used for the group's activities. Talking about this issue, some interviewees said that:

*The charity team has the responsibility of assisting in weddings or funerals. For example, if a family has a deceased person, they will come and pray at the family's house. If someone is sick and needs to go to the hospital, they will visit and have gifts.* (Male, 56 years old, Co Nhue Parish, Ha Noi)

*The benefactors (Ban An nhan) visit all hospitalized, including those coming from the countryside. They have gifts for families with lonely or difficult situations. Recently, there has been a program to greet new students - Priests offer a prayer ceremony for students in the new school year* (Male, 30 years old, Thai Ha Parish, Ha Noi).

Thus, connecting with religious networks in the host city provides opportunities for migrants to adapt to life and receive assistance as needed. Religious networks become a powerful force to help migrants adapt quickly to the host society.

### Religious social capital can be a barrier towards social integration by Catholic migrants

Apart from the positive influences of social capital, social capital also has a downside (Portes 1998, 2014; Pillai et al. 2015). The following section has analyzed the case of one CAG to explore how religious social capital also presents disadvantages.

The St. Anthony Association (Co Nhue Parish) was initially a group established by the parish pastor with the primary purpose of "creating closeness and solidarity for immigrants with a place of religious activities" (Female, 35 years old Co Nhue Parish, Hanoi). This association was established for four years and gathered about 40 families regularly for meetings. Their main activity was practicing singing once a week. Those who joined the association were required to contribute to the common fund in the amount of one million VND/family/year. This fund was to be spent not only on group members but also on charity activities. A member of the St. Anthony group said that

> Last year, the St. Anthony Association organized a donation drive to help the parish buy air conditioners, televisions and give gifts to lepers in Thai Binh Province. The association recently donated to Phu Da Parish in Ha Nam Province, which was isolated because of the high number of people infected with COVID-19. (Female, 35 years old, Co Nhue Parish, Ha Noi)

This case reflects the negative aspect of social capital. Families with a stable income can afford to contribute to the fund regularly, but families with an unstable income cannot. This contribution requirement becomes a challenge to low-income families and may discourage them

from participating in group activities. In addition, group members have to contribute additional time or donate money for charity activities in Co Nhue Parish or other places outside the parish. Although facing economic difficulties due to Covid-19, they still have to continue contributing to help those who are isolated because of the pandemic. Consequently, those who cannot contribute consistently may develops insecurities about their financial circumstances. Our inquiries found that a number of low-income families withdrew from the St. Anthony Association in order to join another group of migrants.

> *To be honest, they gave up joining the group because they did not have the means to participate. A few million [dong] is normal for stable families, but for those selling bread, it is not easy. In the association of 40 families, there are only 20 families that stand out.* (Female, 35 years old, Co Nhue Parish, Ha Noi)

Another finding regarding the St. Anthony Association has to do with the bonding social capital among the 20 families having better economic situations. These families are shown to have stronger connections with each other compared to other members of the group. They organize numerous activities within their sub-group and often post photos of their activities together on the group's Facebook page. According to a member of this sub-group,

> *Every year, after the Feast of Saint Anthony, families participate in the party free of charge, thanks to the association fund. On other occasions, such as Women's Day, Christmas, or special outings, the group invites everyone to participate, but only a few families with high incomes do. Pictures of these families' fun activities are subsequently posted on the group's Facebook page.* (Female, 35 years old, Co Nhue Parish, Ha Noi)

In general, the bonding social capital formed in the sub-group leads to loss of overall cohesion among the group's members and hinders other members in groups from integration.

It can be said that religious social capital bears similarities with social capital in general. Despite the positive side of providing important support for Catholic migrants, it can also create barriers towards their ability to fully integrating within their faith community. Indeed, the differences in income level among Catholic migrants and these differences between migrants and indigenous peoples make low-income people less likely to participate in parish activities. Thus, the priests at some parishes establish separate groups for migrants to participate more comfortably.

## Discussion

As mentioned in the literature review, participation in liturgical celebrations, parish activities, and special groups help to create religious networks for individuals and trusting relationships. This religious social capital can help migrants integrate into the host society more effectively. However, religion can also be a barrier to the process of social integration by migrants. The study set out to assess the role of religious social capital in supporting the social integration of migrants. The results of this study coincide with the findings of Furbey et al. (2006), Deller, Conroy, and Markeson (2018), and Ambrosini, Bonizzoni, and Molli (2021), which demonstrate that social capital can be created through religious participation.

This study emphasized the role of CAGs in forming migrants' social capital. After the Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants in Vietnam was established, all parishes organized many activities to gather and support Catholic migrants to help them adjust into their new home's religious and social life. CAGs represent one of the important channels to attract and support migrants. The parish priests play an important role in establishing these groups. Then, CAGs are developed and sustained by the group members. Participating in these groups brings various benefits for migrants, including both spiritual and material support.

The research findings further support the idea that religious institutions can create networks of mutual support, as mentioned in Foner and Alba's study. Based on trusted relationships among parish members, the migrants can seek assistance in their time of need and reciprocally offer help to others. Besides, these findings suggest that in some cases, bonding relationships of sub-groups in a religious network can create barriers for migrants to effectively integrate into their faith community. These relationships also exclude Catholic migrants who are outsiders of their sub-groups.

However, the findings of this study are not without limitations. First, the study surveyed three places in North and South Vietnam; it should be kept in mind that the conclusion can be drawn only for the places surveyed. Second, the due to the limitations of time and funding, the survey in South Vietnam was restricted in two weeks. Therefore, the number of in-depth-interviewees was quite low in HCMC and Bien Hoa. As a result, qualitative data was analyzed based mainly on the responses gathered in Hanoi. Hence, this study can be viewed as the first attempt to explore the religious social capital formation and its support for social integration for Catholic migrants in Vietnam. Although this current study focuses on internal migration, these findings on the role of religious social capital suggest that religion is an important resource for the social integration of migrants. The results from this study are consistent with previous findings on religion and international migration. This study also reveals a negative side to religious social capital, which was only explored in a limited manner. The results indicate that the advantages and disadvantages of religious social capital in the lives of migrants have to be analyzed further in future research.

*Acknowledgment*

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# "*Tengaw*" Observance: The Kankanaeys' Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

*Brandon Billan Cadingpal[1]*

## Abstract

*The COVID-19 pandemic exhausted many possible ways to deal with its adverse effects. While many were resorting to mere obedience to the authorities, the Kankanaeys adapted the "Tengaw" practice to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. Integrated with the observance of "Tengaw" are the other associated traditional values which meaningfully contributed to the community's COVID-19 response. However, the "Tengaw" practice evolved from tradition rituals to adapt to the drastic lifestyle changes posed by the pandemic. Though it has evolved, the cultural embeddedness and the attached values were not diminished but rather strengthened. The Kankanaeys' observation of "Tengaw" resulted in the following: a) reconnection with others and with nature, b) reassurance of Healing through faith, c) re-adaptation of the traditional values. All of the contributions of "Tengaw" helped in their combat against the novel virus. Some implications of the 'Tengaw" observance's contributions to the Kankaney people were derived and discussed extensively thoughout this paper.*

**Keywords:** *Igorot practice, local traditions, indigenous knowledge*

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## 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.[2] Furthermore, the quarantine imposed to reduce the transmission have profound inevitable social, economic, and health consequences.[3] "Uncertain prognoses, looming severe shortages of resources for testing and treatment and for protecting responders and health care providers from infection, imposition of unfamiliar public health measures that infringe on personal freedoms, large and growing financial losses, and conflicting messages from authorities" contribute to psychiatric illness associated with COVID-19.[4] The effects of COVID-19 caused different psychological responses from individuals. Maladaptive behaviors, emotional distress, and defensive responses are some of the psychological reactions to the pandemic.[5] Heightened levels of stress and anxiety are also common responses to stressful situations,[6] including substance use.[7]

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[2] Abid Haleem, Mohd Javaid and Raju Vaishya, "Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic in Daily Life," *Current Medicine Research and Practice* 10, no. 2 (2020): 78.

[3] Margaret Douglas, Srinivasa Vittal Katikireddi, Martin Taulbut, Martin McKee, and Gerry McCartney, "Mitigating the Wider Health Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic Response," *BMJ* 369 (2020).

[4] Betty Pfefferbaum and Carol S. North, "Mental health and the COVID-19 Pandemic," *New England Journal of Medicine* 383, no. 6 (2020): 510-512.

[5] Steven Taylor, *The Psychology of Pandemics: Preparing for the Next Global Outbreak of Infectious Disease* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019).

[6] Deblina Roy, Sarvodaya Tripathy, Sujita Kumar Kar, Nivedita Sharma, Sudhir Kumar Verma, and Vikas Kaushal, "Study of Knowledge, Attitude, Anxiety & Perceived Mental Healthcare need in Indian Population during COVID-19 Pandemic," *Asian Journal of Psychiatry* 51 (2020): 102083, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102083.

[7] Shuai Liu, Lulu Yang, Chenxi Zhang, Yu-Tao Xiang, Zhongchun Liu, Shaohua Hu, and Bin Zhang, "Online Mental Health Services in China during the COVID-19 Outbreak," *The Lancet Psychiatry* 7, no. 4 (2020): e17-e18.

On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has been claimed to have produced positive effects. According to the study by Kamdi and Deogade, the lockdown elicited the following positive outcomes: a) Mother Nature has been allowed to recharge and replenish as a result of decreased industrial and transportation activities; b) road traffic accidents and crime rate have come down due to less vehicles on the roads and border controls; c) people spend quality time with their family, fulfill their hobbies, learn many new skills and understand the importance of sanitation, hand hygiene, and social distancing; and d) the crisis reveals that there is a need to improve our healthcare system and clinical researches.[8] Although these positive effects are mostly temporary,[9] it has shown people that important life events that have been neglected or overlooked by people's continuous bustle deserve to be given more serious attention. Despite the positive effects, the pandemic continues to pose multiple threats, and people are still looking for ways to adapt and respond to the crisis.

## Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The most common responses to the pandemic have included one or a combination of lockdowns, curfews, and the closing of "nonessential" businesses.[10] Many regions of the world have adopted the common responses in their unique ways. Pressure on the healthcare system and fiscal expenditure on health, regional and local government capacity resulted in faster response to lower the

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[8] Payal Sudhakar Kamdi and Meena Shamrao Deogade, "The Hidden Positive Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic," *International Journal of Research in Pharmaceutical Sciences* 11, no.S1 (2020):276.

[9] Mohamed E. El Zowalaty, Sean G. Young, and Josef D. Järhult, "Environmental Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic–a Lesson for the Future," *Infection Ecology and Epidemiology* 10, no.1 (2020): 1768023, https://doi.org/1 0.1080/20008686.2020.1768023

[10] Abishek Choutagunta, G. P. Manish, and Shruti Rajagopalan, "Battling COVID-19 with Dysfunctional Federalism: Lessons from India," *Southern Economic Journal* 87, no. 4 (2021): 1267-1299.

number of cases of infection, especially during the earlier stages of the COVID-19 surge in South America.[11] In Latin America, where the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic occurred later than in other regions, stringent measures which include scaling up health system capacity were applied.[12] In some European countries, policy responses played a significant role in containing and mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.[13]

Particularly in the Philippines, lockdowns and border controls were also implemented. Policy responses helped in mitigating the effects of the lockdown and in the recovery process of the country. Other notable responses include the contributions of family physicians in the conduct of family-focused health education.[14] Generally, there are similarities when it comes to the government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic around the world. Notably, one similarity observed in most countries like United States of America, United Kingdom and Australia was the high regard to

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[11] Bastián González-Bustamante, "Evolution and Early Government Responses to COVID-19 in South America," *World Development* 137 (2021): 105180.

[12] María Alejandra Benitez, Carolina Velasco, Ana Rita Sequeira, Josefa Henríquez, Flavio M. Menezes, and Francesco Paolucci, "Responses to COVID-19 in Five Latin American Countries," *Health Policy and Technology* 9, no. 4 (2020): 525-559.

[13] Zachary Desson, Lisa Lambertz, Jan Willem Peters, Michelle Falkenbach, and Lukas Kauer, "Europe's COVID-19 Outliers: German, Austrian and Swiss Policy Responses during the Early Stages of the 2020 Pandemic," *Health Policy and Technology* 9, no. 4 (2020): 405-418.

[14] Cruz, Maria Victoria Concepcion P., Karin Estepa-Garcia, Lynne Marcia Bautista, Jane Eflyn Lardizabal-Bunyi, Policarpio B. Joves Jr, Limuel Anthony B. Abrogena, Ferdinand S. De Guzman Noel L. Espallardo, Aileen T. Riel-Espina, Anna Guia O. Limpoco, Leilanie Apostol-Nicodemus, Ma. Rosario Bernardo-Lazaro, Ma. Louricha Opina-Tan.  "Community-Oriented Health Care during a COVID-19 Epidemic: A Consensus Statement by the PAFP Task Force on COVID-19." thepafp.org, April 2020. http://thepafp.org/website/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/PAFP-Consensus-Guidelines-on-Community-oriented-Health-Care-In-COVID-19.pdf.

the elderly who are among the most vulnerable to death due to coronavirus infection.[15]

When examining particular groups, it has been found that the indigenous people constituted one of the most vulnerable groups, as can be seen from past pandemic data, and they remain vulnerable to COVID-19 and its effects.[16] Interestingly, aside from the usual government and other wide-scale responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, some indigenous peoples took the initiative to return to their traditional values and practices and relived it to respond to the current stressful and chaotic situation. Among the Kankanaeys in the Cordillera Administrative Region in the Northern Philippines, the practice of "*Tengaw*" enabled the indigenous population to adapt effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## The Traditional/Pre-pandemic Kankanaey "*Tengaw*" 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.[17] Contrary to many laments that the Igorot cultures are dying out in contemporary society, they are in fact transforming.[18] The practices and values are being adapted to the

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[15] Jean-François Daoust, "Elderly People and Responses to COVID-19 in 27 Countries," *PloS one* 15, no. 7 (2020): e0235590.

[16] Tamara Power, Denise Wilson, Odette Best, Teresa Brockie, Lisa Bourque Bearskin, Eugenia Millender, and John Lowe, "COVID-19 and Indigenous Peoples: An Imperative for Action," *Journal of Clinical Nursing* (2020): 2737-2741, doi:10.1111/jocn.15320.

[17] International Labour Organization, "Indigenous People's Management of Change: Experience of the Kankanaey Community in Sagada, Mountain Province," International Labour Organization, accessed June 5, 2021, https://www.ilo.org/manila/publications/WCMS_493926/lang--en/index.htm

[18] Gaston Kibiten, "Indigenous Cultural Reconstruction and Dynamism: The Kankanaey Clan Reunion and other Contemporary Igorot

times. 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 the Kankanaeys observe in today's uncertain and complex times is the "*Tengaw*."

"*Tengaw*" is a time of rest for the community and the earth.[19] Part of this phenomenon is the habit of staying at home more and doing less hard labor. Historically, the elders decided when to carry out the "*Tengaw*" concerning an ongoing public observance of community concerns. Upon the decision and instruction of the elders, the "*mandu*" or village crier/s will roam around the community to announce the details of the news. During the "*Tengaw*," 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 "*Tengaw*" is going on. If a visitor happens to have entered the community before the "*Tengaw*" begins, he or she will not be allowed to leave the community until the "*Tengaw*" 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 carried out, and that the community is undergoing a "*Tengaw*". It is imperative for everyone to respect the "*Pudong*" sign, the "*Tengaw*," and other community rituals, practices, and values. The "*Tengaw*" practice remains a highly respected practice in the Kankanaey communities as the communities expand and modernize.

"*Tengaw*" is commonly observed in the Kankanaey communities during specific points of the agricultural cycle.[20] "*Tengaw*" is also

Cultural Innovations," Paper presented during the 7th Igorot International Consultation (IIC-7) in Banaue, Ifugao on April 12-15, 2008.

[19] Minnie Degawan, "Kasiyanna: Turning to Indigenous Knowledge During the COVID-19 Pandemic," Cultural Survival, accessed June 5, 2020, https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/kasiyanna-turning-indigenous-knowledge-during-COVID-19.

[20] Minnie Degawan, "Indigenous Peoples: Vulnerable, Yet Resilient,"

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, "*Tengaw*" is also observed. Due to social and cultural developments, the scope of the term "*Tengaw*" 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 "*Tengaw*" is being practiced and identified in different communities, the practice generally 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 communal response. This paper'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 paper will also discuss the personal and communal benefits that "*Tengaw*" observance have given to the Kankanaey communities. From the benefits that the Kankanaey communities receive from this practice, the paper will present implications for the future of "*Tengaw*" observance among the Kankanaeys. Thus, the following questions served as the guide for fulfilling the said objectives of the paper.

- How did the Kankanaeys observe "*Tengaw*" during the COVID-19 Pandemic?
- What benefits did "*Tengaw*" observance give the Kankanaeys?
- What are the implications for "*Tengaw*" practice among the Kankanaeys in the future?

UNESCO, accessed June 5, 2021, https://en.unesco.org/courier/2020-3/indigenous-peoples-vulnerable-yet-resilient.

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 Kankaneys, 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 (6) 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, the particular 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 paper's data gathering, the online communication platforms resulted in fruitful and in-depth discussions. The following sections will thematically discuss the participants' answers to the questions raised in this paper.

**COVID-19 Pandemic "*Tengaw*" Observance**

As stated in the earlier part of this paper, "*Tengaw*" observance is implemented through the act of staying at home. However, the "*Tengaw*" applied in the past was different from

today's context, especially when it comes to the duration, which is oftentimes uncertain. When carried out in the past, the "*Tengaw*" would typically last a day or two.[21] 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 "*Tengaw*" that the people would be observing will not just be a few days. This situation presented a different scenario from the traditional practice of *Tengaw*. Also, this COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented event with effects seen at an extensive and devastating scale. Therefore, the Kankanaey's practice of "*Tengaw*" 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 "*Tengaw*" observance different during the COVID-19 pandemic? b) How was the "*Tengaw*" different from the usual lockdowns implemented in other places?

## The Evolved "*Tengaw*" Observance during the COVID-19

This sub-section discusses the newly integrated ways added to the traditional or pre-pandemic ways of observing the "*Tengaw*." The discussion additionally compares the practice in context of the coronavirus pandemic to the traditional or pre-pandemic way of observing the "*Tengaw*" as presented earlier in this paper.

Aside from the usual practice of staying at home, the situation caused by the coronavirus pandemic called for a more comprehensive practice of the "*Tengaw*". It was evident from the responses of the participants that the anticipation of the indefinite number of days for "*Tengaw*" observance was most considered. Also, during the process of observing "*Tengaw*", 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 "*Tengaw*".

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[21] Minnie Degawan, "Kasiyanna."

*Before the "Tengaw" 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)[22]*

*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)[23]*

The above responses from two of the participants describe a change in how the "*Tengaw*" 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 "*Tengaw*" observance. However, in accordance with past experiences of "*Tengaw*", everyone in the community needed to do their part so that when the "*Tengaw*" days came, they would not have to be engaging in unnecessary heavy activities. Therefore, anticipation and preparation became a necessary part of "*Tengaw*" 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 "*Tengaw*" days well became part of the COVID-19 pandemic "*Tengaw*" practice.

*As part of "Tengaw" practice, I encouraged my family that*

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[22] 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*.

[23] Participant 6 (P6) resides at West Quirino Hill, Baguio City. His Kankanaey roots are from Bauko and Sabangan, Mountain Province.

*we needed to share something with our neighbors who both lost their jobs and had no way to get money 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).[24]*

*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)[25]*

Compared to the pandemic situation, especially in the early stages of the lockdowns, there were fewer problems encountered in the past "*Tengaws*". 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 "*Tengaw*". 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 pandmic. 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,

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[24] 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.

[25] Participant 5 (P5) is from Upper Pinget, Baguio City whose Kankanaey roots are from Tadian, Mountain Province.

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 the context of the pandemic, however, the "*Tengaw*" and recovery activities were not done sequentially, but simultaneously carried out. The following statements from the participants convey this change:

> *I see that part of the "Tengaw" 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)[26]*

> *I don't know, but I think with how long we had been observing the "Tengaw", we could not just wait for the so-called herd immunity so that we could end this "Tengaw". ... We needed to help ourselves and others to recover already from this pandemic. (P4)[27]*

While it is true that there were numerous restrictions on what people could do during the "*Tengaw*" days, it became imperative

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[26] 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.

[27] 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.

also during this pandemic time that there should be action directed towards recovery even as the "*Tengaw*" 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 "*Tengaw*" observance.

## "*Tengaw*" vs. Lockdown

"*Tengaw*" 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 insist that the cultural dimensions associated with this observance differentiate it from a mere pandemic mitigation measure. Observing the "*Tengaw*" is not just about following orders to stay put in one's residence. This sentiment is apparent in the following responses:

> *The "Tengaw" is in no way to be equated with just the term lockdown or quarantine. It is because the "Tengaw" is a culturally embedded practice of the Kankanaeys. (P6)*

> *The "Tengaw" 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)*

> *Though "Tengaw" practice may have been done a little bit different[ly] 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 fear 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 has to be respected even when times are changing. Respect for the elders also speaks of the Kankanaeys' trust and recognition to the elders who decide for what is best in the community. In the observance of the "*Tengaw*" during the pandemic, the Kankanaeys carry out the tradition of displaying trust in the leaders to uphold the community's well-being. The respect also extends to other people

in the community whom they collectively call "*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 "*Pilaw*" (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 carrying out traditional practices. These cultural elements make the "*Tengaw*" characteristically distinct from mere lockdowns or any other quarantine procedures.

## Benefits of "*Tengaw*" Observance

The discussed practice of the "*Tengaw*" 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 "*Tengaw*" 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*"[28] holds that something good will come about as long as one does his or her part. In this section, the specific benefits of "*Tengaw*" observance as conveyed by the participants are discussed thematically.

## Re-adaptation of the Traditional Values and Practices

"*Tengaw*" 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 important role of traditional values for the Kankanaeys:

[28]"Kasiyana" is a Kankanaey term that means 'everything will be alright' roughly translated as hopefulness.

*Because of the "*Tengaw*", 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 storytimes with my mother who is fond of using deep* Kankanaey *[words] to describe the hard situations 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 is 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 is 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*"[29] and "*Seg-ang*"[30] 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 difficulty in the 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 the solution 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

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[29] It is usually equated with the Filipino term "bayanihan" which means Communal Solidarity where everyone in the community are expected to render unremunerated service for the benefit of the community or of a particular family or person in the community.

[30] 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.

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 whole 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 "*Tengaw*" observance, have contributed significantly to the pandemic response of the Kankanaeys.

## Reconnection with Others and with Nature

The Kankanaeys' "*Tengaw*" 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 "*Tengaw*" observance. In carrying out the "*Tengaw*," the Kankanaeys took advantage of the situation to reconnect with relatives and other family members whom they had not communicated with 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 "Tengaw." 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 "*Tengaw*" 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, "*Tengaw*" 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 "*Kasiyan*a" 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 views 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.

## 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 Kankanakaeys because they trust 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 will provide the necessary blessings for humankind. As a display of trust, the people willingly perform their respective roles as well as avoid unnecessarily going out of their residence. As a spiritual act, the Kankanakaeys believe that their faithful observance of the "*Tengaw*" will 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 realize. (P1)*

*The above-quoted responses portray a sense of faith in other people, who would do their part of 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 front liners. (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 hoplessness, despair and human limitations as they fight the pandemic.

## Implications of "*Tengaw*" Observance

## "*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 Kakanaeys. "*Kasiyana*" and "*Seg-ang*" uplifted the spirits of the Kankanaeys. The "*Ub-ubo*" or "*Binnadang*" also significantly manifested the sense of solidarity and community among the Kankanaeys. 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 COVID-19 pandemic. The contributions of the "*Tengaw*" and its integral values serves as a call for the preservation of the traditional practices and values. 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 greatly contribute to the effort to promote and preserve the traditional values and practices of the Kankanaeys.

## "*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.

## "*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. Because most of the Kankanaeys now are 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 very beneficial in discovering the significant ordinary God-talks[31] 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.

## Conclusion

Despite changes in the way the "*Tengaw*" practice was observed, the age-old values attached to it have sustained. The way that "*Tengaw*" practice was carried out and the values which this practice conveys characterized the "*Tengaw*" as something

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[31] Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2002).

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 to respond to the events that had been taking place in their immediate community and all over the world. Further studies focused on the particular values and practices discussed in this paper would create deeper understanding in how the Kankanaeys not only deal with the present pandemic, but also other crises in the past and in the future.

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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[1]*

### ABSTRACT

*This article examines some paradigm shifts needed in the Catholic Church's approach to missionary communication. Whilst much has been written on the practical changes to ministry necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic such as the turn to online platforms, this article focuses on underlying shifts required in the Church's assumed role, priorities, language, epistemology, and partnerships. In particular, the search for meaning and values prompted by the pandemic and other crises calls for missionary communication to move 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.*

**Keywords:** *COVID-19 pandemic, pastoral accompaniment, dialogue, universal values, contemplation, philosophical foundation*

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**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.[2] 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

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[2] Vatican II Council, *Lumen Gentium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), para. 1.

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 realties 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 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."[3] 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

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[3] Pope Francis, *Address for the Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Establishment of the Synod of Bishops,* 17 October 2015.

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* cautions about.[4]

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 whole world is the goal towards which the Church must continuously strive (LG 1). As Pope Francis exhorts, "Let us be permanently in a state of mission" (EG 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

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[4] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (hereafter EG) (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), para. 83.

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."[5]

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."[6] 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

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[5] Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (hereafter FT) (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), para. 210.

[6] Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington DC: USCCB Publishing, 2005), para. 38.

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."[7] 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 legitimate the present situation and need new forms of escapism to help us endure the emptiness."[8]

Now the prolonged disruption caused by COVID-19 is an opportunity for individuals to "pause and recover depth in life."[9] Even psychologists are advocating such a confrontation with one's deepest beliefs, values, and purpose in order to emerge stronger.[10] 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."[11] 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

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[7] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), para. 113.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] For example, see Willian 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.

[11] Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998), para. 6.

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 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.[12] 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 counter-example 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

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[12] 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#.

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."[13] 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 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

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[13] Bernard J. F, Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 103, 101.

> 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.[14]

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."[15] Tolle adds that "many people use the word God to describe it; I often call it Being."[16] 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."[17] Even the atheist Arthur Koestler has identified something of "the infinite" which he encountered in a mystical experience.[18] 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."[19] 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

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[14] Alan Lightman, *Searching For Stars on an Island in Maine* (London: Corsair, 2018), 6.

[15] Eckhart Tolle. *Practicing the Power of Now* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 1999), 2.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 5.

[18] 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.

[19] Meira Chand, "Embracing Inner Imperfections in a Damaged World." *The Straits Times*, Dec 10, 2020.

contemplative or even non-verbal. For 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."[20] 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."[21]

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."[22] 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

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[20] International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014), paras. 49, 50.

[21] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (hereafter GS) (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), para. 14.

[22] Website of Presencing Institute, accessed August 15, 2021, https://www.presencing.org/aboutus/theory-u.

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.[23]

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.[24]

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.

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[23] Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean, *St Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 26-27.

[24] Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 156.

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.[25]

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."[26] Missionary communication thus

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[25] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 5.
[26] Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018), para. 170.

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."[27] 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

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[27] Pope Francis, "A Plan to Rise Up Again," in *Life After the Pandemic* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), 47.

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" (FT 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."[28] 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

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[28] Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2019), 65.

social cooperation."[29] This view is echoed in practice even beyond the Church, such as in global conventions to promote ethical standards. Vaclav Havel 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?[30]

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

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[29] Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009), para. 59.

[30] Vaclav Havel, "Radical Renewal of Human Responsibility," Speech at Harvard University Commencement 1995, accessed August 15, 2021, http://www.humanity.org/voices/commencements/vaclav-havel-Harvard-university-speech-1995.

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.[31] 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, 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.

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[31] 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.

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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# ESSAYS

# Ecclesial Communion: It Takes a Pandemic

*John Patrick Murray, OSA*[1]

## ABSTRACT

*One faith community in central Bangkok lives its imperfect life from week to week. Then along came a pandemic and turned its life upside down. No longer could it gather for weekly worship, its one core act together. Its gathering was overtaken by social distancing and livestreaming its regular service on YouTube. As it wreaks its havoc, a pandemic seems to have the natural gift of 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. This essay is a 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.*

**Keywords:** *Ecclesiology, Church communication, Covid-19 pandemic, communion*

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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."[2]

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the Church is 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."[3]   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 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

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[2] D.P. Horan, "Thomas Merton's Wisdom for a Church in Crisis," *National Catholic Reporter* (June 23, 2021).

[3] Pope Francis speaking to VAX Live – May 5, 2021

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, Australia; Asian nationalities including Filipinos, Thais, Singaporeans, Indonesians; various others, whether from Guatemala or beyond. What they all shared was a good use of English as the lingua franca for this community.

This faith community consists of both single adults and families. They are generally 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 up ordination to married men. This was not to be the response. Rather the Pope took a deeper view of Church, noting in

his document, "*Querida Amazonia*", that the priest shortage must be seen as an opportunity for the Catholic Church to "awaken new life in communities". 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."[4]

Looking back, this Church Synod response to a regional crisis shows a way today for Church responding to a 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."[5] 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

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[4] Junno Arocho Esteves, "Pope Says There is No Quick Fix for Priest Shortage in Amazon Region," *Catholic New Service* (February 12, 2020).

[5] P. Carroll, "Moving Mysticism to the Centre: Karl Rahner (1904-1984)," *The Way* 43, no. 4 (October 2004).

its known, self-perpetuating systems. A maintenance approach does not facilitate targeted and good change to occur. Rather change has to 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.

### (1) *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 assume 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 whose 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 to which they 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. It seeks rather 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 a pandemic, these tensions become more noticeable with more serious consequences arising due to the serious matters brought forward by a 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.

## (2) *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 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. Rather 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 has gone 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 shown 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, 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.

### (3) *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. A pandemic has challenged Church on how to gather. It has chosen social media, using Facebook, YouTube and Zoom, as the media for worship. For now, its worship and life can no longer primarily depend 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?

As communities cannot gather, their very fabric of unity is questioned. Community can no longer be based on 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.

In the age of pandemic lockdown, the term reclaimed by Church for defining our coming together in worship is spiritual communion. This pandemic has made 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 opening up 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. So 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, operates 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?

For now, 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. 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 up Church 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 a website. With the pandemic, this website 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 website 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.[6]

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[6] D.P. Horan, "Thomas Merton's Wisdom for a Church in Crisis," *National Catholic Reporter* (June 23, 2021).

This reflection remains true today as the Church responds to 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. Don't 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 pandemic world of 2021. 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 a 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.

# *Digi-Mission*: You Will Be My Witnesses to the Ends of the Earth (Acts 1:8)

*Clement Baffoe, SVD[1]*

## Abstract

*This essay discusses the importance of digital media in the Church's mission especially during these times of the COVID-19 pandemic when people's movements and physical contacts have been restricted. Bringing together the words 'digital' and 'mission', the author coins the word 'digi-mission' which is simply the act of doing mission using the digital tools and the various media platforms at our disposal. Whereas the term 'digi-mission' is new, the process of evangelizing using digital platforms is not new. The essay cites certain real life examples of how people all over the world have been engaged in 'digi-mission'. Reiterating some invaluable suggestions made by various Church documents on the importance of media in proclaiming the Good News of Christ and also the role media has played during this pandemic, the author holds that it would be disappointing if the post-pandemic Church abandons social communications in its evangelizing work.*

**Keywords:** *Digi-mission, digital media, Church mission, evangelization*

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## Introduction

From the beginning of Christianity, evangelisers have always made good use of any resources that could enhance their spreading of the Good News. St. Paul preached the message of the Risen Christ by writing letters to his fledgling Christian communities. Today, we continue to preach the message of Christ not so much by letters but by using the technological tools we have at our disposal. In this essay, I wish to introduce a new term – "digi-mission". The term "digi-mission", coined by me, is the combination of two words: *Digital* and *Mission*.

One might be asking the rationale behind this novel name. Recently, the Provincial of the Society of the Divine Word, Australia Province, Fr. Rass Asaeli, SVD, at an SVD Queensland District meeting, asked the confreres to suggest a theme for our 19th General Chapter in 2024. Listening to the many confreres who spoke during the meeting, it was obvious that all wanted a theme that acknowledged the importance of media and social communication, considering especially their impact on our ministries during these times of the coronavirus pandemic and beyond. It was after this meeting that the thought of bringing together the two words "digital" and "mission" came to my mind.

The Cambridge Online Dictionary defines "digital" as "using or relating to computers and the internet." "Digi-mission" then is simply the act of doing mission using digital technology and media. It is a mission style which goes "out of itself", reaches out, never limited by church buildings, walls, territorial borders or even the invisible enemies such as the coronavirus.

The Catholic Church has always encouraged its faithful to make good use of the means of social communication and the myriad opportunities they offer. The Pontifical Council for Social Communications, speaking about the importance of media in its document *Ethics in Communications,* says the media provide significant advantages from a religious point of view since "they carry news and information about religious events,

ideas, and personalities; they serve as vehicles for evangelization and catechesis. Day in and day out, they provide inspiration, encouragement, and opportunities for worship to persons confined to their homes or to institutions."[2] "But over and above these, there also are benefits which are more or less peculiar to the internet. It offers people direct and immediate access to important religious and spiritual resources."[3]

Focusing on the text of Acts 1:8, I would like to reflect on how "digi-mission" fulfils the promise of Jesus, in which he charges his disciples to embark on a global, boundless, and an all-inclusive mission. The mission, which until that time had been mostly around Galilee, Jerusalem and also to only the lost sheep of Israel (Mt. 10:6), was due to be worldwide. The renowned Bible scholar Charles Talbert states that "the end of the earth" in Acts 1:8 could best be understood as "everywhere."[4]

## Digi-mission: "You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

Since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, people in ministry have sought creative ways to reach out to those to whom they minister. James McTavish, a missionary priest working in the Philippines, reflects that it is the Holy Spirit who is squeezing this creativity out of those in ministry during this time of the pandemic.[5] I find McTavish's statement to be in line with the message of Acts 1:8 since it was only after the Holy Spirit had empowered the Apostles that they were able to go out and be witnesses of Christ everywhere. Having been baptised

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[2] Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in Communications* (2000), no.11.

[3] Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *The Church and Internet* (2002), no. 5.

[4] Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 2005), 9.

[5] Anthony Le Duc and John Mi Shen, eds., *Pastoral Creativity Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: Global Experiences* (Manila: Logos Publications, 2021), 105.

and confirmed, God's people have been empowered in this time of the pandemic with creative thoughts and ways to be able to bring the love of Christ to people even at "the end of the earth". Many churches and parishes have opted to having liturgies and prayer sessions online. Among the various media used are Facebook, WhatsApp, Zoom, Telegram, YouTube, and pre-recorded liturgies. One cannot overemphasise how instrumental these media platforms have been in connecting Christian communities. Thus, although people cannot physically gather due to the multiplicities of lockdowns and limits on church attendance, gatherings have been possible online.

From the outset, I must acknowledge that doing mission digitally has its own setbacks as well. It is worth recognizing that "digi-mission" could sometimes exclude certain generations of people, for instance the elderly, certain economic classes of people, especially those who cannot afford the gadgets for communication, people who lack adequate technological literacy, and people who live outside of coverage areas. For instance, during my priesthood ordination in November 2020 my parents and family in Ghana, who not only could not travel to Australia due to the pandemic, also could not watch the ordination Mass online since the poor network in my village would not permit them to follow the live streaming. This is an example of how "digi-mission" could sometimes exclude some people.

Moreover, "digi-mission" could be so *virtual* that the therapeutic nature of physical and human touch is lost. In his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis observes that the digital media "lack the physical gestures, facial expressions, moments of silence, body language and even the smells, the trembling of hands, the blushes and perspiration that speak to us and are a part of human communication….Digital connectivity is not enough to build bridges. It is not capable of uniting humanity."[6]

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[6]   Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, Encyclical Letter (2020), no. 43.

Acknowledging this shortcoming, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications about two decades before Pope Francis' encyclical still opined, "Although the virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for real interpersonal community, the incarnational reality of the sacraments and the liturgy, or the immediate and direct proclamation of the gospel, it can complement them, attract people to a fuller experience of the life of faith, and enrich the religious lives of users."[7] In the same vein, Anthony Le Duc succinctly argues that the 'virtual' reality of the digital space is not empty. According to him, there is an embodiment or actual and real physical human presence behind what is seen or heard via the digital media. The 'virtual' also has real effects on real people and hence is more than just 'virtual'.[8]

It is worth mentioning that "digi-mission" has challenged the traditional ways of worshipping and doing mission. Defining a diocese or a parish as a specific geographical area seems no more entirely true (Can. 372 §1 and Can. 518). The definition of a parish and diocese has become very much fluid. Writing about the need of a parish to go beyond its own space, the U.S. bishops in their statement *Called to Global Solidarity* state, "A parish reaching beyond its own members and beyond national boundaries is a truly 'catholic' parish. An important role for the parish is to challenge and encourage every believer to greater global solidarity."[9]

Mission in the time of the pandemic has not only been to our local parishes and dioceses, thus the "lost sheep of the house of OUR Israel" (Mt. 10:6). For many people, *the world is now their parish and diocese.* With gadgets and social media at our disposal, one could choose to attend Mass elsewhere in Africa, Asia, the Americas,

[7] Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *The Church and Internet* (2002), no. 5.

[8] Le Duc and Mi Shen, *Pastoral Creativity Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic,* 221-224.

[9] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Called to Global Solidarity," accessed 3/10/2021. https://www.Called to Global Solidarity International Challenges for U.S. Parishes | USCCB.

Oceania, or Europe. When the pandemic broke out in 2020, I was living in a parish in the Melbourne Archdiocese. We were three pastors from three different countries living in the community. After our Mass recordings, we would send the videos to our respective home countries – Vietnam, India and Ghana. In addition, we sent them to our friends all over the world. Although these Masses were recorded to serve our immediate parish, in the end we were actually getting "overseas parishioners" to worship with us. Furthermore, because in Australia dioceses often use national TV or radio stations to broadcast their liturgies, the liturgies end up going nationwide. Against this backdrop, most people are no more bound to their local parish or diocese. A person could choose to "attend" Mass in the neighbouring parish, diocese, or country. One has the option of choosing Mass celebrated by a priest elsewhere who has may have a short but spiritually nourishing homily. From this perspective, "digi-mission" helps the Church avoid tendencies towards nationalism and ethnocentrism which do not promote "*missio ad gentes*."

Although Jesus could not have had the idea of "digi-mission" in mind in Acts 1:8, it is not farfetched to connect his original mission plan for the apostles with "digi-mission" of the digital age. According to Acts 1:8, Jesus said to his disciples, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." At the time of this promise, the disciples were in Jerusalem; however, Jesus told them that their ministry would go even to the ends of the earth. Just as this mission mandate was to be beyond local boundaries, so it is with "digi-mission". Buttressing this point, the Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio* says, "It would be difficult to suggest that Christ's command [to go to the end of the earth] was being obeyed unless all the opportunities offered by the modern media to extend to vast numbers of people the announcement of his Good News were being used."[10] "Digi-mission" is the way of ministering within one's

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[10] Order of the Second Vatican Council, *Communio et Progressio*, Pastoral Instruction (1971), no. 126.

own "Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria but also to the ends of the earth." In the literary context of this essay, Jerusalem and Judea could be thought of as our immediate surroundings and local parishes where we are already at home with things. Likewise, Samaria in the present context might be compared to those around us who like the Biblical Samaritans were not at peace with the Jews.

The "Samaritans" thus are those who hitherto have been excluded from our everyday ministries such as the sick and homebound, the aged in nursing homes, divorced people, people working tight shifts among others. These people can now get a better share of the Church's missionary efforts. It is now possible for people whose busy schedules excluded them from Masses to still participate whether on the train or bus. Even though I had previously pointed out the possibility of "digi-mission" being exclusive to certain groups of people, at the same time, "digi-mission" can also promote inclusiveness in our ministries, especially for those who are housebound, sick or even working long shifts. For instance, the '*Mass for You at Home*' website states that "Mass for You At Home is the longest-running religious program on Australian television. The show enables viewers who are isolated from the usual parish celebration – through age, distance, illness, imprisonment or other reasons – to participate in a Sunday Mass from their homes."[11]

One important area of ministry of the Catholic Church, greatly supported by Pope Francis, is the ministry to migrants and refugees.[12] It is exciting to mention how migrants and asylum seekers have been ministered to in this time of the pandemic through digital means. In the book *Pastoral Creativity*, I read with delight the story of Maria Tien Phan. Phan is a Vietnamese who works at Assumption University of Thailand in the Human Resource Department. In her essay, Phan speaks about the language barrier that exists between

[11]  Mass for You at Home, accessed 3/10/21. https://www.Mass for You at Home – The official website of Mass For You At Home, Australia .

[12]  Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 37-41, 80.

the Thai Government officials and many undocumented Vietnamese migrant workers and refugees in Thailand during the early months of the pandemic. She recounts that the Pastoral Committee for the Vietnamese Migrant Workers approached her to create a Facebook page through which, Phan who has a good command of both the Vietnamese and Thai languages, could support the Vietnamese migrants. Through this media, Phan was able to answer questions and also explain various pandemic related matters to many undocumented Vietnamese migrants who were at times subjected to 'fake news' on Facebook because they were not fluent in the Thai language. Even though Phan was approached by the Church to undertake this important social justice mission, it is heart-warming when Maria says her outreach was not only to Catholics but non-Catholics as well.[13]

Phan's Facebook ministry to the undocumented migrant workers in Thailand is a classic example how mission is being done using the digital tools at our disposal. Empowered by the Holy Spirit and through "digi-mission," Phan has been able to be a witness of Christ to the oft-neglected group of undocumented migrant workers.

Also, another world worth discussing in connection with "digi-mission" is the world of young people. It is one of the worlds that is easily left out of our ministries due to is special and complex nature. Pope Francis in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to young people and to the entire people of God, *Christus Vivit,* describes the digital environment as "a public square where the young spend much of their time and meet one another easily, even though not all have equal access to it, particularly in some regions of the world. They provide an extraordinary opportunity for dialogue, encounter and exchange between persons….can facilitate the circulation of independent information providing effective protection for the most vulnerable and publicizing violations of their

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[13] Le Duc and Mi Shen, *Pastoral Creativity*, 127-132.

rights. In many countries, the internet and social networks already represent a firmly established forum for reaching and involving young people, not least in pastoral initiatives and activities."[14] It is a well-known fact that even before the COVID-19 pandemic befell the world, the majority of young Catholics did not attend Masses or liturgies. And so, instead of waiting to have young people come to church on Sundays, the Church should rather go to where they are and where they spend much of their time, and that space is the digital world. As seen in Pope Francis' observation above, the digital environment offers opportunities for dialogue, encounter, exchange between people and also standing up for justice. Therefore, some contemporary principles of mission such as dialogue, encounter, justice, peace and integrity of creation are being made possible among young people. This clearly demonstrates what "digi-mission" is all about.

Another way that "digi-mission" is contributing to nourishing people's spiritual lives is by helping them to pray and worship God from the comfort and convenience of their homes. The programs can be accessed even when one is not physically at church for Mass or have time to "attend" at the livestream. In addition to nourishing people's spiritual lives, "digi-mission" has also brought different mission situations to people's awareness allowing more global and effective actions to be taken. Due to "digi-mission" it has become easier for people, especially Christians in the global South and North to share ideas on issues such as migration, ecological crises, and social injustices in order to find holistic solutions. Despite being able to bring people from diverse cultures and geographical locations together, doing mission through digital media helps to reduce our carbon footprints in the atmosphere. However, it must be noted that using digital media also produces greenhouse gasses even if in much smaller quantities compared to cars and planes.[15]

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[14] Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation (2019), no. 86.

[15] Elisabeth Műeller, "The Digital World and $CO_2$: Mails also Cause

Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) observes that transport alone accounts for roughly 23% of the energy used in the United Kingdom. CAFOD in its action plan is calling on people to have car-free days as well as forgo flights when going on vacation.[16]

In a similar way, instead of driving or flying to different areas for mission work, we can now minister or engage in mission via Zoom or Facebook. Having been spared travelling due to the digital environment, the amount of carbon one would have contributed to the atmosphere is significantly reduced. This is one of the concrete ways to prophetically proclaim the message of ecological conversion.

Lastly, the pandemic offers us opportunities to raise questions to ourselves and each other. Could the pandemic be God's way of teaching us to worship Him in Spirit and Truth? (Jn. 4:24)? Could it be God's way of telling us to extend our mission beyond our self-referential and cocooned church environments to the ends of the earth? Again could it also be God's way of teaching us to be creative and be open to the technological signs of the times? I do not have any certain answers to these questions but they are worthy of our reflections and meditations. I am aware that articulating the questions in this way is theologically controversial, and I am cognizant of Stephen Bevans' words that "we cannot say that this pandemic is in any way God's will, a test of our faith, or permitted by God…."[17] However, I would like to humbly suggest that since Bevans has not given any cogent argument to refute the claim

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Greenhouse Gases," accessed 30/09/2021. https://www.The Digital World and CO$_2$: Mails also Cause Greenhouse Gases – VIVAT International.

[16] Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, "Your carbon footprint," accessed 30/09/2021.

https://www. cafod.org.uk/Campaign/COP26-climate-summit/Your-carbon-footprint.

[17] Stephen B. Bevans, "The Shift of Mission Paradigm in the Church and SVD," *Verbum SVD* 62, no. 1 (2021): 25-26.

that the pandemic is in any way God's will or permitted by God, I think him saying that the pandemic cannot be God's will is open to question. As St. Paul argues, "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord?" (Rm. 11:33-34). I rather would like to keep an open mind on this matter of God's will. After all, nobody can be certain of this! Those claiming it is God's will or permitted by God equally do not have any definitive arguments to convince us. As real changes are caused by crises, "digi-mission" might surely be one of the many changes the pandemic has brought to us. Also, I strongly think that it would be disappointing if the post COVID-19 Church does not move into the future with these great tools of the "new normal." These technologies must effectively complement our traditional face-to-face ways of ministering in order to bring forth the reign of God.

**Conclusion**

I conclude this essay by reiterating that the promise of Jesus to his apostles in Acts 1:8 is urgently being fulfilled in the days of the COVID-19 pandemic via the use of digital tools and the internet. Despite the virtual nature of "digi-mission", it has been clarified in this writing that "digi-mission" has an element of physical embodiment which might be understood as '*real-virtual*'. This process which has already begun before the pandemic but was intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic is what I have identified as "digi-mission." "Digi-mission" is helping to bring Jesus' promise in Acts 1:8 to fulfilment. All of us can now take part as Jesus' witnesses to the ends of the earth by way of this form of mission.

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*BOOK REVIEW*

# THE TRUTH ABOUT NATURE: Environmentalism in the
## Era of Post-Truth Politics and
## Platform Capitalism
by Bram Buscher, University of California Press,
December 2020, 254 pages.

*James Phillip M. Monserate, OHF, M.A.[1]*

This essay evaluates the book entitled The Truth About Nature by Bram Buscher which elaborates and highlights truth tensions under (meta) theoretical bearing, haring truths and natures under the political economy of platforms, post-truth, power, the politics of co-creation, distinction, hysteria under environmentalism with its corresponding salient points which holds significance to readers, and the ever-changing society.

Buscher puts emphasis on the current environmental predicaments the world is experiencing and the corresponding problem on environmental action and on how communicating said environmental concerns could lead to apathy instead of action. He was able to point out the relevance of concentrating on facts and truths given the current environmental situation the world is facing today and also raised the problem on how to communicate and share the need for environmental action in a post-truth context. One prevalent reality the work was able to effectively substantiate and emphasize is the contemporary environmental condition. "Today's greatest threat is not climate change, not pollution, not famine, not flood or fire. It's that we've got people in charge of important sh*t

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who don't believe in science" (Buscher, 2). This was able to clearly give readers a glimpse of the deeper problems and realities etched and rooted in our present environmental concern, specifically on how nature can be saved through appropriate evidence-based action and how any commitment to a shared understanding of facts or reality seems unrealistic (Buscher, 4-17). Buscher's elaboration on environmental concerns and the role of people is effective in establishing the truths behind it.

One of the main points clearly provided by Buscher is that there is a need to make truth productive given that it has regained urgency against the background of the emergence of post-truth. According to him, "a metaphysics of truth tensions is crucial for any effective and meaningful environmental politics going forward because it allows for mediating between different statuses of the term in different times and spaces and in relation to different objectives or aims, and because, politically, it provides direction in the tension-ridden space between more solid and shifting forms of knowledge" (Buscher, 13).  Different views from different scholars on truth claims about truth itself, and many others were able to strongly provide a critical perspective on the power-only understanding of truth, the post-truth conundrum, and how a political ideology of truth emphasizes nature and power in relation to its very notion as well as truth tensions. It establishes a deeper understanding towards the impending need to do justice in the shifting relations between power, truth, and nature in the contemporary setting of complex concerns which is vital in understanding the political ecology of truth that Buscher is after. Scholars such as Focault also elucidated how truth is directly connected to power which further shapes the present understanding of truth. Buscher was able to distinctly argue that a focus on the integrated realms of political economy and everyday praxis allows for a deeper understanding of power (Buscher, 19). The main point provided by the author was well-structured and corroborated, providing a glimpse on what the book has to offer towards understanding the truth about nature.

"Nature belongs to us all" (Buscher, 37). This is one of the primary points that effectively summarized the section on sharing truth and natures. According to Buscher, sharing of nature through various media forms also influences the relationship between truth and nature. The truth about nature is shared with and rendered visible to power is one of the main and salient points presented (Buscher, 38). This point was intelligibly expounded through introducing the fundamental contradictions and tensions in relation to sharing nature. The said point puts relevance to how post-truth needs to be countered by sharing truths and facts about nature and that these are based on the idea that we all share nature (Buscher, 37). Nature which is shared with and by power is one that capital can see and said power mentioned is one which is a capitalist power prevalent in the entire system (Buscher, 39). The language of natural capital according to him, helps to "speak nature to power" which in turn aims to speak the truth regarding the present environmental predicament. Despite fundamental contradictions, different actors that use nature for capital purposes can have a deeper idea of sharing nature in mind (Buscher, 40). This is in relation to how sharing nature is constrained by marketization and privatization of natural lands which serve as one of the constraints in sharing nature. Buscher's elaboration on the salient points was able to provide a clear, substantial, and impactful insight towards how nature is shared, its correlation to power and its changing relations, and how different environmental actors can possibly have a deeper idea on sharing nature.

Another significant point made by Buscher is how conservation actors at influential conservation organizations are changed by social media. Said changes were clearly explained and established by Buscher. His well-corroborated interviews from different respondents of conservative organizations and social media experts support the fact that conservation organizations feel more pressure towards being transparent and accountable. Data-driven explanations make the work more significant and objective, creating depth for the

facts established. Despite other older generation employees being skeptical about the integration of social media in said organizations, the responses were able to effectively show that social media needs to be integrated and learned by various conservation organizations to bring the right message to the specific audience in varying media as well as bring more structure in the utilized media strategy. One of the most important points effectively established by Buscher is that conservation organizations are after engagement and action and the rapid rise in social media utilization across conservation organizations shows that said organizations have undergone rapid processes of social media professionalization and increased its usage. It provides a bigger perspective to the role of social media in environmentalism. Hence, providing a contribution towards deeper understanding on how it can serve as a medium to reduce environmental impact and promote environmental awareness. Buscher was able to clearly establish the point that, "the choices that conservation organizations make in sharing truths and natures online renders both nature and truth biased, partial, and selective" (Buscher, 83). He was also able to successfully address the partial and biased data through analytical and methodological strategies which solidifies the credibility of the facts established. Buscher intends to show an analysis of the online and offline dimensions of the elephant corridor over time and show that there was a large disconnect between the natures shared online and the offline natures they were meant to conserve.

Another main point stated, and well supported in this book, is how online philanthropic gestures are far removed from offline realities. According to Buscher, many similar online projects like the Elephant Corridor as well as crowdsourcing initiatives serve as a politics of platforms and a battle over the control of doing good online given that development capital and data flows become central in online conservation (Buscher, 107). The Elephant Corridor project reveals that the rise of new media platform led to change. Particularly in using the plight of elephants and

other conservation and development projects as a background against the disappointing reality which prevails, and that is how platforms compete over the capital flows which becomes the primary motivating factor of the initiative which also determines the possibilities for "doing good" online. Online platforms as techno-cultural and socio-economic constructs highly influence how online users see or understand doing good for nature online (Buscher, 109). This clearly shows the main point provided by Buscher, a main point which is a post-truth in action.

The new media and how they are used to share truths and natures reinforce the unjust legacies of Fortress Kruger which was one of the main arguments stated. This is supported by the fact that politics of distinction functions in two integrated and mutually reinforcing ways: how new media offer individuals new tools to distinguish themselves and how it allows individuals to inscribe distinctions and boundaries into social space (Buscher, 124). Buscher was able to strongly emphasize his main point by providing evidence;one of which is Carruthers narration on how "in exploring the idea that whites romanticized their past through the natural landscape and its wildlife, it is imperative to take cognizance of the fact that whites chose to disregard the role that Africans had played in that past (Buscher, 126). This supporting evidence was clearly established and affirms how the symbolic importance of Kruger as a romanticized white fortress was reflected in iconic mediations of the park and the idea of Kruger as a "modernist form of symbolically enclaved space" of deeply truthful natures. Buscher's main point on how Kruger truths and natures reinforce unjust legacies was clearly, effectively, and strongly established. It also holds substance as to how truths about widely shared and popular natures are deeply embedded in various contexts may it be economic, technological, social, political, and many others. The fact that Kruger natures are likely(?) to be seen by affluent whites without context, history, or positionality through various new media platforms which substantiates the main point

provided contributes to a deeper understanding towards the development of apartheid through Kruger natures and its corresponding impact to racial and class dynamics as well as various contexts.

Another focal point provided by the author is how the poaching crisis towards rhinos results to hysteria, specifically, the politics of hysteria which haunts numerous whites in South Africa and beyond. It also leads to the sharing of emotions through new media that people have more control over. This main point was well-expounded through the discussion with regards to how social media spaces appear to encourage more extreme or exaggerated behavior which further exacerbates issues such as the rhino-poaching crisis (Buscher, 152). Buscher was also able to define hysteria and politics of hysteria being a description of the dominant online expressions in response to the said crisis which provided much clarity towards the readers when it comes to the main point provided.. It is also a relevant contribution to deepen understanding towards the truth about nature and how it can be saved through appropriate action which is weakened by hysteria towards rhino extinction. A better understanding towards truths about nature in connection to the poaching crisis is achieved with ample support and elaboration. Concepts of heroization and vilification are also explained in the text which also supports the main point on how hysteria leads to sharing of emotions through new media wherein those slaughtering rhinos are considered "evildoers" while those going out to protect rhinos are rendered "heroes" (Buscher, 147). This shows how the main point was well-supported by various details, being clear and concise, as well as how it provides a deeper understanding to the crisis highlighted and the politics of hysteria. There is also an implicit call to action to minimize hysteria through new media platforms given the established truth that it weakens the addressing of the rhino poaching problem.

To recapitulate, Buscher's main points were cohesive and coherent and holds substance with regards to the main topics highlighted in the book such as truth tensions, sharing nature, truth about nature, the political economy of platforms, post-truth, power, environmentalism (on a different level), and many others. The salient

points were also able to effectively establish the current natural situations; the crises that needs to be addressed--which strengthens the call to environmental action. His elaborations were raw yet in-depth, relevant but skeptical, and timely but timeless. Buscher was able to clearly state and emphasize his focal points through supporting evidences may it be from respondents, scholars, or other data and sources which also makes the work reliable and objective. The main points also contribute towards deepening understanding on current environmental predicaments and the call to action, the role of social media in influential conservation organization, and the existing relationship between truth, nature, and power..

## *REPORT*

# Conference Report
# ARC 12ᵗʰ Intenational Roundtable via Zoom

When the report about the ARC 11ᵗʰ International Roundtable was made in this journal (Vol. 18, no. 1), it was mentioned that the event, which took place in mid March 2020 at St. Louis College, Bangkok, Thailand, went from an originally planned in-person event to a "hybrid" event (half in person and half online). This last minute change in the format was a necessary response to the fast changing and quickly escalating situation of the COVID-19 pandemic taking place in Thailand and around the world. By late February and early March 2020, many of the participants scheduled to present their research at the Roundtable were no longer able to travel due to flights being cancelled, governing institutions not granting permission to travel, or fear of not being able to return once in Thailand. After consulting with the leaders at St. Louis College, ARC decided to carry out the program with a hybrid format instead of postponing the event to a later and undetermined time. As a result, those who were unable to travel were given the option to present their research and participate in the conference from the safety of their own residence. Others who were already in Thailand or were able to travel attended the RT in person as scheduled. Non-presenting participants who were already in Thailand could also attend the program in person. Despite the last minute changes, the 11ᵗʰ International Roundtable turned out to be a successful one.

The 11ᵗʰ RT, however, proved to be a harbinger for what was about to be experienced by the entire world as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to disrupt virtually every aspect of human lives. For nearly two years, in-person gatherings became rare events organized only when there was a respite in the pandemic situation, and even then, these events had to be severely restricted in terms of attendance. What became the norm were online activities for such things as teaching and learning, meeting and conferencing, worshipping and socializing.

And although the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) taking place in November 2021 was organized in person in Glasgow, and thousands of people attended this significant event on climate change, some prominent world leaders chose to participate online instead of making the trip. Similarly, in mid November, Chinese President Xi Jinping and his counterpart US President Joe Biden also carried their three and a half hour summit meeting via the internet. At this point in time, one can say that online conferencing remains the preferred option for many institutions around the world.

In March 2021, when ARC laid out the plans for the 12th International Roundtable for 5-6 November 2021, we anticipated that even at this time, the pandemic would still remain a subject that continues to occupy large parts of ruminations, reflections and research across disciplines. However, we also did not want the conference to only focus on what had been happening throughout the pandemic, but also to look forward to the post-pandemic world. As heavily as the pandemic continues to weigh on our present lives, researchers and scholars have the responsibility to not only examine the past and present, but also to draw upon those experiences to make proposals for the future. It was with this intention and vision that the theme for the ARC 12th International Roundtable was determined: "*Religious Communication During and Post Coronavirus Pandemic: Examining Present and Future Models and Strategies*."

We also decided to organize the conference entirely online (Zoom, YouTube and Facebook), and open it to anyone who would like to participate through one of these platforms. The primary platform where the scholars would be sharing their research and interacting with other participants, however, would be Zoom. The RT was divided into two sessions, each session being three hours long. A total of 12 scholars gave presentations around the theme of the RT, speaking from Asia, Europe, North America and South America. Non-presenting participants also hailed from a variety of time zones across the globe.

From this year's International Roundtable, the following salients could be made:

- Conscientious religious communication continues to be instrumental in addressing the issues related to the pandemic and its impact on people's emotional and spiritual lives. Moreover, it holds tremendous implications for interreligious relationship as people of different religious traditions dialogue and cooperate with each other in order to journey through the challenges presented by the crisis. Indeed, pandemics are not new in the history of humanity and have been a part of many experiences of religious traditions. Imtiyaz Yusuf emphasizes that within the tradition of Islam, there are teachings that could be directly applied to crises similar to the current situation.

- Interculturality is presented as a model for the post-pandemic globalized world, in which there 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 gears towards mutual transformation" (Lazar T. Stanislaus, SVD). Interculturality takes seriously the positive elements from each culture in order to create a new culture that promotes authentic human flourishing.

- Religious communities must continue to navigate between the ideals and practices of their spiritual traditions while confronting the practical requirements for effective pandemic control. In this regard, religious leaders play an especially crucial role in motivating and mobilizing their religious adherents to take certain actions that contribute to resolving the crisis. This is especially important when oftentimes there is a lack of trust by certain groups towards civic leaders. As

Yoel Cohen demonstrated in his studies, Haredi Jews (ultra-orthodox) "were critical of the flow of information, that the information had limited credibility, and that they had greater confidence in information provided by rabbis than the Health authorities."

- Participating in religious rituals was normative for people of religion around the world. Chandrabhanu Pattanayak observed, "The speed at which a distinction was marked between the offline and the online modes of some of the rituals and ceremonies bears testimony to the continuing value of religion and the tenacity of believers to adapt the rigid, formulaic and ritually binding performances of normal times to the fast-changing reality of the pandemic-infected world." The multiple discussions related to online religious rituals, especially Catholic liturgies throughout the pandemic, indicate that digitally mediated worship was not only a necessary experience created by the pandemic, but may continue to be prevalent in the post-pandemic world. In the Catholic Church, the value and authenticity of online liturgies have been interpreted differently by individuals and segments of the Church. The study of online worship in the Philippines by Benjamina Paula Gonzalez-Flor and Joshua Michael G. Jonas asserts, "The relational prayer theory posits that prayer inputs such as religious relationships and media sources processed through public or private processes result in prayer outcomes beneficial to the physical, psychological, and spiritual being of the person. It can be surmised then that flipping church services from physical to online became a regular Sunday ritual which implies that spirituality indeed can happen anytime, anywhere with or without a pandemic." Leo-Martin Angelo Ruiz Ocampo, in his presentation, called for closer examination of the negative and positive aspects of liturgical teleparticipation in view of the new normal in order to articulate more accurately the nature of this activity. Daniella Zsupan-Jerome proposed the lens of *mystagogy* as a way to

invite reflection on the experience of online worship.  Zsupan-Jerome believes that the concept of mystagogy as a catechetical or broader formational framework can help Christians make sense of their digitally mediated worship experiences during the pandemic. According to Zsupan-Jerome, "Engaging in mystagogy of one's experience of digitally mediated worship is spiritually formative, and allows one to recognize the mystery of God present in an otherwise unusual and challenging dynamic."

- The human suffering created by the pandemic is an opportune time for theological reflections. In his presentation, Norman Melchor R. Pena Jr., SSP explored the correlative resonance between the seven last words of Christ on the Cross and the experience of the New Normal communication forced by the COVID-19 pandemic. By correlating the words of Christ during the last moments of his life on earth to the real experiences of suffering during the pandemic, Pena attempted to demonstrate "how religious communication can be done in the new normal that leads to hope in God and entrustment to Him who is ultimately the Alpha and the Omega – the first and the last Word of creation." In a similar spirit, Frederick Prevosa warned of the temptation of mystifying and spiritualizing the pandemic "can lead to defeatism and the belief that this suffering is divinely ordained." Rather the current situation needs to be reflected upon in ways that can communicate hope and salvation amid death and suffering.

- Suffering by people are not only addressed by theological and spiritual affirmations but also by practical words and deeds aimed at alleviating suffering. Vince Henry M. Salles' study of Camillian Hospital chaplains in the Philippines demonstrated that despite the multiple limitations presented by the pandemic, hospital chaplains continued to use creativity and courage in order to minister to COVID-19 patients, their families and

healthcare workers. The study not only highlights the continued essential role of hospital chaplains during the pandemic, but also suggests a need for explorations of new ways to carry out this ministry in the post-pandemic context. Albertina Navas called for empathy in communication during and post-pandemic, especially in the online platforms, in order to combat infodemic, hypersensitivity and disinformation, which are especially prevalent in digital spaces. Whether online or offline, Navas insisted that "empathic communication is more than speaking kind words of encouragement, sympathy and consolation. It requires concrete actions as evidence of solidarity, trust and support."

- Finally, there needs to be some paradigm shifts in the post-pandemic world. Christina Kheng identified multiple shifts needed in the Catholic Church's approach to missionary communication. According to Kheng, "The search for meaning and values prompted by the pandemic and other crises calls for missionary communication to move 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."

Based on the experience of ARC's 11th and 12th International Roundtables (hybrid in 2020, and fully online in 2021), it seems quite certain that we may never go back to the entirely in-person format implemented by the first 10 Roundtables. During the last two years, we have become acquainted and comfortable with accommodating some or all of the participants online. Although we can go through long lists of positives and negatives for each of the formats – all in person, all online, hybrid – the reality of the present context seemingly affirms that one has little choice but to incorporate both the digital and the analog in future "gatherings".

**Participants in 12ᵗʰ International Roundtable**

 **\* Yoel Cohen** is professor at the School of Communication, Ariel University, Israel. His books include *God, Jews & the Media: Religion and Israel's Media,* and *Israel's Media and Spiritual News: Reporting Religion Around the World.* His research interests include religion news, religion and media in Judaism and nuclear policy and media. He is convenor of the Religion & Communication working group of the International Association of Media & Communication Research.

 **Paper Title:** Rabbis versus Israeli doctors in the COVID-19 crisis

 **\* Benjamina Paula Gonzalez-Flor** is Professor and Scientist from the College of Development Communication and the Director of the Learning Resource Center of the University of the Philippines Los Banos. She is also an affiliate professor and chair of the Master of Development Communication program of the UP Open University.

 **Paper Title:** *Simbahay* from physical to virtual: Flipping church services in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic uncertainty and implications to spirituality

 **\* Christina Kheng** is a lay person from Singapore who teaches and consults for the East Asian Pastoral Institute and Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific. She has a PhD in Religion and Theology from the Australian Catholic University. Her research focuses on theological methods for Church-society dialogue.

 **Paper Title:** The search for meaning and values in the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond: Paradigm shifts in communicating the joy of the Gospel

 **\* Albertina Navas** holds a PhD in communication, MBA, and is a journalist. She has over 20 years of experience serving over 50 clients in the public, private, and academic sectors, in 18 countries. She represents Latin America at SIGNIS Global Digital Desk

and acted as facilitator at the Faith Communication in the Digital World led by the Vatican Dicastery of Communications. Currently, she serves as Director of Strategic Communication at the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador. She is the author of the book *Desempeño vs. impacto: un modelo comunicacional aplicado a la política digital (Social Media, Citizenship and Politics).*

**Paper Title:**    Empathy: The key to handle digital communications post-pandemic

**\* Leo-Martin Angelo Ruiz Ocampo** is faculty member of the Institute of Religion, executive assistant of the Vice Rector for Academic Affairs, and research associate at the Center for Theology, Religious Studies and Ethics at the Pontifical and Royal University of Santo Tomás where he is finishing his doctoral studies in Theology. Aside from academic articles in local and international journals, he has published more than ten titles, including three books and translations of important Church documents, among them the Filipino edition of Laudato Si', the first translation of a papal encyclical in the Philippines printed with permission from the Vatican Press.

**Paper Title:** Catholic Liturgical Teleparticipation Before and During the Pandemic, and Questions for the New Normal

**\* Chandrabhanu Pattanayak** is the director of the Institute of Knowledge Societies. The Institute of Knowledge Societies (IKS) holds the exploration of the interface between modern technologies and traditional knowledge systems at its core. He is also a producer /director at the Indira Gandhi National Open University, and has made several video and audio programs which have been telecast and broadcast on national and international channels on numerous occasions and have been used as classroom teaching aids in several universities and institutions throughout the world. He has produced

and directed about 40 videos and about 50 radio documentaries. He has attended and presented scholarly papers in more than 150 national and international conferences and has published in several international journals and books.

**Paper Title:**  Homogenization of religious practices during Covid times: A new digital caste system

**\* Norman Melchor R. Pena Jr., SSP** is a Catholic priest of the Society of St Paul. He is Dean of Studies of Saint Paul Seminary Foundation and lectures on Intercultural Communication, Mission, New Evangelization and Communication Planning and Management, and Social Media Studies at the Divine Word Institute of Mission Studies, Maryhill School of Theology and St Paul University Manila (SPUM). He holds a doctorate in Communication (*Universita' Pontificia Salesiana - Italy*) and a PhD in Education (SPUM).

**Paper Title:** Christ, Cross and COVID-19: Words that never die in the new normal religious communication

**\* Frederick Prevosa** is a member of the faculty at the University of Santo Tomas-Senior High School (UST-SHS) in Manila, Philippines. Aside from teaching, he assists in the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines – Committee on Basic Ecclesial Communities (CBCP-BEC) in coordinating the programs of the various small communities/Basic Ecclesial Communities of the different parishes and dioceses all over the country. His research interests include contextual theology, liberation theology, Christology, soteriology, popular religiosity, feminism, and liberation-postcolonialism.

**Paper Title:**  Communicating salvation in the time of a pandemic: Life and death, suffering and salvation during the coronavirus crisis

**\* Lazar T. Stanislaus, SVD** completed his doctorate in Missiology at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome. He was the Director of Ishvani Kendra—Institute of Missiology and Communications, Pune, India. He served one term as the President of the International Association of Catholic Missiologists (IACM). He was the Provincial Superior of India Mumbai province. In addition to contributing many articles to different journals and editing books, he offers, in theological institutes, courses and seminars in Missiology, Interculturality and related subjects. At present, he is the Generalate Mission Secretary of the Society of the Divine Word, Rome.

**Paper Title:**  Living interculturality in the post-pandemic world

**\* Vince Henry M. Salles** teaches religion at the University of Santo Tomas in Manila, Philippines, where he is also currently taking up doctoral studies in Theology.

**Paper Title:** The Communicative role of Camillian chaplains in their pastoral ministry during the COVID-19 pandemic

**\* Imtiyaz Yusuf** is Associate Professor and Deputy Dean for Students Development and Community Engagement and also Coordinator, Islam and Buddhism Programme at The International Institute of Islamic Civilisation and Malay World (ISTAC-IIUM), Malaysia. Dr. Yusuf is also a Senior Fellow at the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, (ACMCU) Georgetown University, Washington D.C., USA. Formerly, he was the Director of the Center for Buddhist-Muslim Understanding in the College of Religious Studies at Mahidol University in Thailand. He specializes in Religion with a focus on Islam in Thailand and Southeast Asia and Muslim-Buddhist dialogue.

**Paper Title:** Religious communication during and post coronavirus pandemic eras: A Muslim perspective

**\* Daniella Zsupan-Jerome** is Director of Ministerial Formation at Saint John's University School of Theology and Seminary in Collegeville, Minnesota, USA. Her research explores the intersection of social communication, digital culture, and pastoral theology. She has served as a consultant to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Communications, as an educational consultant to the Catholic Press Association, and is an organizer for THEOCOM, an annual conference on theology and communications held at Santa Clara University. Major publications include: *Connected Toward Communion: The Church and Social Communication in the Digital Age* (Liturgical Press, 2014); *Evangelization and Catechesis: Echoing the Good News through the Documents of the Church* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2017); *Authority and Leadership: Values, Religion, Media* (co-editor, Blanquerna, 2017). She has also published articles in *Worship, Religious Education, New Theology Review*, and has contributed chapters to a number of edited volumes.

**Paper Title:**   Entering the mystery: Formative strategies for making meaning out of digitally mediated worship during COVID-19

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