

PASTORAL CREATIVITY

AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
GLOBAL EXPERIENCES



EDITED BY

ANTHONY LE DUC, SVD
JOHN MI SHEN

Logos Publications, Inc.

**PASTORAL CREATIVITY
AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Global Experiences

Edited by

**Anthony Le Duc, SVD
John Mi Shen**



**Logos Publications, Inc.
Manila
2021**

***Pastoral Creativity amid the COVID-19 Pandemic:
Global Experiences***

Cover design: Anthony Ng Swee Leong

Copyright © 2021 Asian Research Center for Religion and Social
Communication (St. John's University, Bangkok, Thailand)
Email: arcstjohns.bkk@gmail.com

Published by LOGOS Publications, Inc.
1916 Oroquieta St. Santa Cruz, Manila

All rights reserved
Manufactured in the Republic of the Philippines

ISBN 978-971-510-309-1

We would like to express our gratitude to Wu Guolong, Lin Aiqin, and Zhao Lixing whose financial support has made this book project possible; Kenneth E. Rayco for helping with the proofreading and technical support; the individuals who have taken the time to review the book prior to publication; and all the authors for their valuable contributions to this volume.

Table of Contents

Preface	i
Part I: Parish Ministry	
1. Challenging yet Memorable Moments of the COVID-19 Pandemic <i>Anthony Liew, Malaysia</i>	1
2. Evangelization during COVID-19: Teamwork and Adaptability <i>John Uhal, USA</i>	9
3. A Future Full of Mysteries and Surprises <i>Dominic Nguyen Quoc Thuan, Japan</i>	18
4. Church and Pastoral Care during the Pandemic in Europe <i>Nepolean James Raj, Belgium</i>	27
5. Pastoral Creativity in Parish Ministry during the Pandemic <i>Henry Siew, Singapore</i>	39
6. Masses and Funerals: The Surviving Liturgies amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic <i>Clement Baffoe, SVD, Australia</i>	43
7. My Pastoral Diary during the COVID-19 Pandemic <i>John Baptist Trinh Dinh Tuan, SVD, Chile</i>	51
8. Connection, Isolation and Love in the Time of COVID-19 <i>Patrick Carl P. Gunnacao, Philippines</i>	60
9. Parish Pastoral Work during the Coronavirus Outbreak <i>Lu Yunqiang, China</i>	65

Part II: Teaching and Formation Ministry

10. Sustaining and Nourishing Friendship with People with Different Developmental and Intellectual Abilities in Times of COVID-19

Joseph R. Quane, USA.....72

11. Communicating the Good News to Thai Children amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

Camillo Pornsann Singchai, Thailand.....81

12. How to Teach in Time of Pandemic?

Leo-Martin Angelo R. Ocampo, Philippines.....88

13. Religious Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Family Affair

Minh Anh Dinh, SVD, USA.....93

14. Arching Over: The Experience of the Rainbow in the Midst of the Pandemic

James Phillip M. Monserate, OHF, Philippines.....102

15. Injecting Life into the Body of Christ: Reflections on Mission during a Pandemic

James McTavish, FMVD, Philippines.....107

Part III: Outreach Ministry

16. Pastoring the Religiously Wounded

Shiju Paul, SVD, USA.....118

17. A Facebook COVID-19 Hotline for Undocumented Vietnamese Migrant Workers in Thailand

Maria Tien Phan, Thailand.....127

18. Ministry on Palm Island during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Sarita Kurikattil, SSpS, Australia.....132

19. Spiritual Nourishment in Time of Crisis: Pastoral Creativity in the Catholic Diocese of Lucknow, India	
<i>Joshy Xavier, SJ & Lawrence Devin Noronha, India.....</i>	138
20. Ministry during COVID-19: A Mixed Bag	
<i>Len Uhal, USA.....</i>	147
21. Reflection on Pastoral Work during the Pandemic	
<i>Shen Shuangying, China.....</i>	155
22. Reaching Out to Natural Disaster Victims Amid the Coronavirus Pandemic	
<i>Joseph Vo Cong Dung, Vietnam.....</i>	162
Part IV: Theological Response	
23. Making Ways Out of No Way: Grace and Creativity in the Time of COVID-19	
<i>Stephen Bevans, SVD, USA.....</i>	172
24. Pastoral Creativity and Performative Theology: Responding to COVID-19	
<i>Gnana Patrick, India.....</i>	179
25. A Personal Response	
<i>John Mansford Prior, SVD, Indonesia.....</i>	202
26. Principles of Ignatian Spirituality that Can Aid COVID-19 Response and Rebuilding	
<i>Christina Kheng, Singapore.....</i>	205
27. Online Pastoral Presence: Virtual or Real?	
<i>Anthony Le Duc, SVD, Thailand.....</i>	219
28. Conclusion: Moving Forward with Pastoral Creativity in the Post-Pandemic Church	
<i>Anthony Le Duc, SVD</i>	
<i>John Mi Shen.....</i>	231

PREFACE

Despite the ever increasing degree of globalization taking place in the world characterized by intertwining economic systems buttressed by digital technology, it is rare to have a happening to which every segment of humanity on all continents of the earth can directly relate. The images of pain and suffering caused by war and famine in one part of the world may be reported to people in another part of the world, and the people who view these images might react with sympathy and compassion for the hapless victims, but ultimately the events themselves might not affect them very deeply in terms of their daily life. Even the effects of climate change and global warming, which is wreaking havoc on some parts of the world, are yet to be felt or understood by many people, especially those living in wealthy countries more equipped with coping mechanisms to deal with adverse impacts brought about by such changes.

The coronavirus pandemic that made its appearance in late 2019 and ravaged the world for several years was an exception to the usual state of affairs because it has managed to turn the entire world upside down with all the disruptions brought upon the global political, social, economic, and religious structures. Arguably at no other time in history has an invisible virus managed to cause equal-opportunity destruction throughout every part of the world to the extent that SARS-CoV-2 which gave us COVID-19 has. It has claimed victims of all socio-political-economic backgrounds regardless of age and gender. Admittedly, a detailed examination of the pandemic reveals that certain groups are more negatively affected than others, even within the same country or community. However, the reality of the pandemic as played out thus far shows that the virus aims to not discriminate. One of the most convincing pieces of evidence to prove this point is the fact that the United States, which is politically and economically the world's most powerful country, also has the largest number of infections and deaths (at the time of this book's publication).

Beside the public health and the economic-political aspects of the pandemic, there was also a religious dimension as the chaos and suffering experienced by humanity globally raised multiple questions within certain individuals and communities of religion. Questions ranged the gamut of whether the pandemic represented divine punishment for sin or was the consequence of negative human karma—depending on the religious outlook of those who raised the issue. Others asked if the pandemic was merely the result of a mishap or was a sign of some impending apocalypse that humanity needed to take heed. Other age old questions were also re-articulated to address the situation of the pandemic: Where is God in all of this? Why does evil exist? And if there is a God, why could such evil be allowed to exist? Despite the fact that these questions have been addressed by countless generations of theologians and philosophers, the context of the pandemic revived these questions leading to a myriad of articles, homilies, talks, YouTube videos and even some books dealing with these issues.

At the same time that religion played a part in helping people to understand and make sense of the pandemic, religion, in terms of being a social and cultural entity, also counted itself among the victims of the coronavirus. The Catholic Church, one of the largest and oldest institutions in the world, also could not escape the wrath of COVID-19. From the Vatican to rural Asia, churches had to be shut down and normal activities that sustained the life of the church and the worldwide flock had to be cancelled or take on a different form. No matter if it was an annual parish feast or important liturgical occasions such as Easter and Christmas, celebrations of these events took on very different forms from what Catholics have known all their lives. In addition, Church leaders and pastors who were expected to be “shepherds living with the smell of the sheep” were asked to stay away from them, especially those who were elderly and sick, who were classified as “vulnerable” to coronavirus infection. However, it was not just the sheep themselves who might die from coming in contact with the shepherds; the shepherds too might die as a result from being too close to their sheep. Indeed, as of January 2021, Italy alone lost over 200 priests, many of them still actively serving their communities at the time of their

death.¹ This is a tragedy for the Church in Italy, which is already facing a serious draught in terms of vocations.

But the Church has never and cannot recoil in the face of danger, especially when it affects the well-being of the faithful and the entire humanity. The very first sentence in the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* declares that “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ,”² organized around the Catholic Church. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic is not a time for the Church to renege on this promise, but an opportunity for the Church to respond to the signs of the times with concrete actions with courage, determination, confidence, and trust. Besides, in light of the global reality of the pandemic, this sense of solidarity should not be a difficult task for the Church to envision.

In addition to the virtues mentioned above, another essential virtue in times of crisis such as presented by the pandemic is creativity. “Pastoral creativity” became somewhat of a buzzword in ecclesial discussions during the COVID-19 pandemic, referring to a pro-active and innovative response by pastoral leaders and workers when confronted with seemingly insurmountable challenges and limitations. “Pastoral creativity” itself, nonetheless, is not a new phrase; the expression did not get invented during the pandemic, but much sooner. In 2012, Pope Benedict XVI remarked in the homily in the Mass at the conclusion of the Synod of Bishops:

Besides traditional and perennially valid pastoral methods, the Church seeks to adopt new ones, developing new language

¹ Carol Glatz, “ COVID-19 claims lives of over 200 priests in Italy since the start of the pandemic,” Catholic Philly (January 7, 2021), <https://catholicphilly.com/2021/01/news/world-news/COVID-19-claims-lives-of-over-200-priests-in-italy-since-start-of-pandemic/>

² Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, no.1.

attuned to the different world cultures, proposing the truth of Christ with an attitude of dialogue and friendship rooted in God who is Love. In various parts of the world, the Church has already set out on this path of pastoral creativity, so as to bring back those who have drifted away or are seeking the meaning of life, happiness and, ultimately, God.³

This same phrase was also used numerous times in the concluding document of the Fifth General Conference of Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean in 2012.⁴ In one paragraph, the conclusion states, “Our people have held priests in high esteem. They recognize the holiness of many of them, as well as the testimony of their life, their missionary work and pastoral creativity, particularly, of those who are in remote places or more difficult settings” (no. 99). In the face of the deleterious effects brought upon the poor by globalization, the bishops say that “concrete actions should be designed with pastoral creativity to influence governments to enact social and economic policies to deal with the varied needs of the population and lead toward sustainable development” (no. 403).

In the “*Instrumentum laboris*” of the thirteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (2012), the phrase “pastoral creativity” was employed in the text by affirming that “only a sound and robust faith, witnessed in a poignant manner in the lives of the martyrs, can give impetus to many short-term or long-range pastoral projects, breathe new life into existing structures and spur a pastoral creativity to meet the needs of people today and the expectations of present-day society.”⁵

³ Pope Benedict XVI, Homily in the Mass for the Closing of the Synod of Bishops, 2012, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20121028_conclusionesinodo.html

⁴ Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, Concluding Document of the Fifth General Conference of Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, 2012, <https://www.celam.org/aparecida/Ingles.pdf>

⁵ Synod of Bishops, 2012, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20120619_instrumentum-xiii_en.html

The emphasis on “pastoral creativity” and a related concept “missionary creativity” continued to be employed consistently even from the very beginning of Pope Francis’ pontificate. In one of his first documents, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis called for pastoral and missionary creativity in proclaiming the Gospel. In context of the parish, the Holy Father states:

The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be ‘the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters’.⁶

Moreover, the Holy Father encourages people involved in pastoral work to eliminate outdated ways of thinking and doing. “Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: ‘We have always done it this way’. I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities.”⁷

Although the phrase “pastoral creativity” employed by Pope Benedict XVI has been transformed into “missionary creativity” by Pope Francis, as also seen in the document *Amoris Laetitia* (2018),⁸ pastoral creativity has continued to be an important evangelizing thrust in the Holy Father’s teachings as can be seen in numerous documents and remarks. Indeed, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, he asserts:

⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, no. 28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 33.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html, no. 57.

Any Church community, if it thinks it can comfortably go its own way without creative concern and effective cooperation in helping the poor to live with dignity and reaching out to everyone, will also risk breaking down, however much it may talk about social issues or criticize governments. It will easily drift into a spiritual worldliness camouflaged by religious practices, unproductive meetings and empty talk.⁹

Similarly, in *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis affirms that “Mercy, creativity and hope make life grow.”¹⁰ Thus, both Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have emphasized in various ways and in multiple contexts the need for pastoral creativity in the evangelizing mission of the Church, especially in response to contemporary challenges proposed by enormous social, political, economic and technological changes.

It is fundamentally from these exhortations by the last two Popes that the project to create this book and the title given to it was conceived. The idea for this modest book came about shortly after a Zoom meeting in September 2020 by the SIGNIS Digital Desk Core Team, of which both of us are members. The fact that this meeting took place on Zoom, however, was not related to the pandemic. The SIGNIS Digital Desk Core Team had already been holding meetings online because the members live in different parts of the world. The most convenient, not to mention cost effective, way for us to meet is by Zoom.

As part of the check-in process of this particular meeting, each member of the desk shared about his/her work and ministry during the pandemic. We took turns sharing about the difficulties presented by the pandemic and how we tried to navigate and overcome these challenges in our lives. The experiences of the members of the SIGNIS Digital Desk Core Team demonstrated that despite the many disruptions and limitations brought

⁹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 207.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html, no. 173.

about by the global pandemic, each person managed to carry out his or her responsibilities in the best way possible with patience, resolve and resourcefulness. Several were also actively working to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on their immediate communities. One person even managed to fully recover after having suffered from COVID-19 herself.

Shortly after the SIGNIS Digital Desk Core Team meeting, we had a chance to speak to each other on WhatsApp, reflecting on the stories that were shared in the Zoom meeting. In the process of our exchanges, we came up with the idea of publishing a book, either in the electronic format or as a hardcopy, or both. The volume would contain accounts of people's pastoral experiences during the pandemic, not unlike the stories that we shared from our own experiences. These essays would be written in the first person perspective, by people who were engaged in pastoral work, and would reflect the challenges as well as the creativity needed to overcome these circumstances. Having agreed on the general direction of the book, we decided to write a brief "Call for Contribution" which we sent out to various networks of individuals that we could connect to.

Although we presented the theme of the book in our brief announcement, we did not require that the writers had to highlight the aspect of "pastoral creativity" in their essays. We only asked that the essays be "based on personal experiences of doing pastoral work in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic." We emphasized that the book "aims to bring together rich and inspiring experiences from around the world, forming a diverse cross-cultural tapestry of stories on how pastoral work has been carried out in the face of numerous challenges presented by the pandemic." Therefore, we purposefully left the topic somewhat open-ended to accommodate a variety of experiences. We did not want the writers to feel pressure to "prove" that what they did in terms of responses to the pandemic constituted "pastoral creativity," although, many of the responses recounted could certainly be deemed as such.

The collection of essays in this book represents the responses by pastoral workers to our invitation to share their real-life experiences. The writings

come from various countries around the world, most of them submitted between the months of September 2020 and February 2021—just as the pandemic was at its height in many places. The authors include not only priests but also non-ordained pastoral workers (religious, seminarian, lay). Many of the authors are not professional academics or writers. However, all are active in pastoral ministry in various capacities in the Church. All had to contend with their ministries (and oftentimes their personal lives) being torpedoed by an invisible virus that reportedly began in a wet market in one corner of the world, and subsequently spread to every continent on earth – even Antarctica! In the face of the pandemic, the pastoral workers did not panic, feel despair, or start blaming others for what was going on. Rather, they made a pastoral response in the most pragmatic way possible, using resources available to them, may it be human energy, money, or technology. The experiences recounted in these essays reflect these pastoral responses. What we aimed for and believe received from those who submitted their essays was a meaningful chronicling of how each person perceived and responded to the signs of the time as a pastoral agent.

The content of the book is organized into four sections. The first three sections are essays recounting real-world experiences of pastoral agents. These essays are roughly divided into three sub-groups. The first group of essays focus on the parish setting and the ministries that each parish attempted to implement in response to the crisis. The second group of essays highlight the education and formation ministry, which includes both catechism teaching and other educational settings such as theology schools and formation houses. The third group of essays primarily depict outreach ministries such as those with the poor, migrants, and other marginalized groups. The pastoral workers carrying out these ministries may do so in context of a parish/diocesan setting or as part of a non-parochial program. While there are some overlapping details among the essays, this fact does not affect our overall intention, which is to present these experiences around some common themes that could facilitate appreciation and comparison of these stories. The final section, comprised of five essays are responses to the experiences presented in the previous

three sections. The aim of this section is to dialogue with the experiences recounted in the essays originating from a variety of countries around the world. Some of the issues that the writers of the responses were asked to consider include presenting theological insights gained from these experiences; lessons to be learned from what has been shared; the understanding of “pastoral creativity” in the contemporary world; and implications that these experiences hold for the post-pandemic Church.

During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, surely there will be many books and academic articles written to reflect on and analyze the myriad issues that revealed themselves as a result of this life changing episode in modern human history. This small volume hopes to contribute to the process of dialogue and reflection by focusing on how the Church and its pastoral agents respond to unexpected events taking place in the world and the lessons that could be drawn from these real-world experiences. In making this book, it is our hope that we have demonstrated the value of being aware of the signs of the times and the willingness to examine them for Spirit guiding wisdom in order to carry on the mission of evangelization in the post-pandemic world.

PART I

PARISH MINISTRY

Challenging yet Memorable Moments of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Anthony Liew¹
(Malaysia)

The COVID-19 pandemic has been extremely challenging to face as it has widely affected the whole world—physically, economically, financially, mentally and even spiritually! The Malaysian government had to implement a Movement Control Order (MCO) throughout the country, which came with necessary Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to break the chain of the COVID-19 from spreading far and wide. As a result, our local church also came out with relevant guidelines in line with the government’s SOP to safeguard the parish community. At the same time, we strived to face these challenging situations with a new normal way of life.

Our parish, St. Michael’s Church (SMC), has also been greatly affected by this COVID-19 pandemic. During the MCO, we had to stop public Masses and postpone most of the church activities including our highly anticipated 130th anniversary celebrations to comply with the government’s policy and diocesan guidelines! Although it was challenging, there were also a lot of memorable moments that God had showered upon us throughout this MCO.

¹ Anthony Liew is a priest in the diocese of Penang, Malaysia, and was ordained in 2014. He served at the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit and the Church of the Holy Name of Jesus, Penang. Presently, he serves as the parish priest of St. Michael’s Church, Ipoh Perak in the Diocese of Penang, Malaysia.

“Virtual Experience” in Re-enacting the Last Supper

When our arch/dioceses decided to stop all public Masses beginning on Saturday, 14 March 2020, most parishioners were shocked. Some members of the community did not agree with this decision as they thought the COVID-19 situation was still under control at that time. Despite these voices of dissent, all the churches in peninsular Malaysia followed the instruction to close temporarily. Later, the Malaysian government also made it compulsory for all places of worship to be closed.

I still remember that more parishioners came for the evening Mass on the Friday before we shut the church doors. Without being certain when we would be able to gather for Mass again, many were “virtually” experiencing the Last Supper of Jesus knowing that this would be our “last” public Mass in a while! With heavy hearts, we participated in the Mass and received the Body of Christ. With the gravity of what was going on in the world and in our own country and parish, I believe this experience was more powerful than even our annual Last Supper celebration on Holy Thursday.

When we were informed that after more than three months of closure, our church could be re-opened, we were overwhelmed with joy to be able to come back for Mass. Although we started with only one Mass (instead of 4 Masses per weekend) on 28 June 2020 and with limited congregation (about 200 parishioners) to comply with the SOPs, many parishioners were looking forward to attend the Mass. Having this longing to come to the Eucharist, those parishioners who attended this “first Mass” after three months truly treasured every part of the liturgy, especially the moment they received the REAL Body of Christ (instead of spiritual communion through participating in online Mass).

Afterward, some parishioners sent me their feedback to express how they felt having attended this Mass. One person told me that “nearly everyone who was there this morning cried when receiving communion.” Another person expressed the following sentiment:

Lord, if not with Your grace to allow me to receive communion, I would not realise how much I longed after You... Yes, I yearn for you, as the deer pants for the water. When I've received You in my mouth, I can feel the conversion into living water; it satisfied my long desire after so many months of absence. I was truly touched. That was my first experience of the Living God. It was so real and exceeded description.²

The period of isolation enforced by the MCO has awakened us to the realization not to take Mass for granted! Now we have three weekend Masses and recently started to live stream the Mass online. I pray that our parishioners may treasure every Mass that we have as Jesus' departing gift for us at His Last Supper instead of merely going to Mass as a habit or to fulfill Sunday obligation!

“SMC Our Home”

Through baptism, we are brothers and sisters in Christ with one common Heavenly Father – we are one family in Christ and SMC is our home where we spend time with God and with one another. Together with our parishioners, we had planned our parish programs to materialize this theological concept with our vision in making “SMC our Home”! We started a few teams including parish maintenance group, coffee morning team, gardening group, and faith formation team to take care of our church as our very own home (instead of merely voluntary service). It is our responsibility when we truly take SMC as our home for no one would say that he cleans his own house voluntarily.

In preparing for our 130th Anniversary celebration, we had started to collect family photos from our parishioners and placed them on a specially designed board set up inside our church. As we could not have public Mass in our

² Original text: “主，若不是你愿意让我领受你的圣体，我也不会发现自己对你那么的饥渴……是的，我渴慕。如同鹿切慕着溪水。当祢的圣体在我的口中时，我感觉圣体化成了活水，满足了多个月的饥渴，心里很是感动。第一次有这种如同喝了活水的感触，而这种感觉是多么的真实。甚至连文笔也无法形容……”

church during MCO, I celebrated my private Mass in the church “with my parishioners” through all these family photos and informed them via WhatsApp or Facebook. Since then, more families have submitted their family photos to be put into our SMC family “photo frame”. This helped us to feel connected and blessed that we still could “join” Mass as one family in Christ at SMC our home.

When we were totally locked down during MCO, many parishioners shared with me that they truly missed our church – they were missing our beautiful old church, Chinese cultural style Mother Mary’s shrine, gardens around the church, and above all, missing one another as we used to come together every week. I thanked God for the care and support from our parishioners in supporting SMC as our very own family financially, mentally and spiritually. It is even more encouraging to see some new faces coming forward to serve as helping hands when we had more Masses with necessary SOP to be observed.

Indeed, this MCO has helped us to have a greater sense of belonging to our church. SMC is not only a place of worship; it is also our home where we belong to for we are indeed one family in Christ!

“Staying Connected” Though We Are Apart

In order to continue the spirit of “SMC our Home” during MCO, we strove to keep our SMC parishioners connected with our church and with one another, our one family in Christ. We encouraged our parishioners, especially the leaders of various ministries or Catholic neighbourhood, to use technology to keep in touch with one another. Instead of phone calling, we urged our parishioners, especially our Evergreen (elderly) group members, to use WhatsApp video call or other apps to call at least one person each day so that they still could see each other “face-to-face”. It was amazing to know that many of them have finally become more familiar with using these new technologies and gadgets, though some were reluctant to learn before the MCO.


Being the only priest in the parish, I personally found it challenging to make home visits to all my parishioners. As I was encouraging my parishioners to call at least one person each day during MCO, I personally found that I could also use this video call to do “home visits” to my parishioners. By calling at least one family per day, I could “visit” most of my parishioners and get to know them without the challenge of time and distance barriers. This became more crucial when I got to know of their challenging situations (especially some who lost their job and income) during this MCO and thus tried to offer help and support accordingly.

We also started to use our SMC Facebook page to keep in touch with parishioners – for disseminating information, parish activities, and engaging with one another. While we were deprived from coming to church with total lockdown during MCO, we invented a “Guessing Game” by showing one photo each week with a small part of our church building/statues/Mother Mary’s shrine for our parishioners to guess. It was rather surprising that a parishioner who left for work in the United States many years ago was actively involving herself in this game. At the same time that the game was fun, it also encouraged everyone to be more attentive to every detail of “SMC our Home”. We also invited parishioners to share their stories about the priests who served in SMC in the past as our effort to gather historic moments of the community, which are part of the treasures of our church.

With the support of technology, our catechists could continue to accompany our children in their faith journey. Although it was not the best way compared to face-to-face catechism lessons, it was crucial as we tried to build the foundation of faith for our children. It was nice to see some of the homework of our catechism students with some beautiful art works. I still remember the beauty of our catechism formators who encouraged our children to team with their parents for an online Bible Sunday competition. It was truly amazing to see their talents from their products with some drawings, singing, Bible storytelling or even making short video clips. Above all, I believe these activities have brought them closer as a family with greater love.

In view that not all parishioners could come to “SMC our Home” for Mass even now that we have started three weekend Masses, we have also started live streaming our Masses publicly through our SMC YouTube channel since September 2020. We believe that online Mass is important so that we may continue to grow together spiritually and support one another as one SMC family by praying and acting together with the homily and relevant announcements during the Mass. Adding this technological dimension to our parish ministry was challenging because we did not have much knowledge in terms of how to manage it. Yet, I thank God that He has shown us the way by giving us necessary resources including manpower on this project. Although we are still struggling with this new mission, we are encouraged to strive as we see the significance of this mission in engaging our parishioners within SMC our family as well as other Catholics outside our sheepfold.

130th Anniversary and More...

Although we could not celebrate our 130th anniversary as originally planned, we tried to do whatever we could on a smaller and simpler scale to mark this significant milestone of our church. We thanked God that we had started to commemorate this anniversary from Oct 2019. We printed our own SMC T-shirt with the slogan “I  SMC” and our beautiful church building imprinted on the back. On the parish feast day Masses on 3 and 4 October, we projected a video clip about Saint Michael and had a presentation of our church anniversary song, “This is Our Church,” by church choirs. A prize was presented to the composer, Dr. Michelle Chan, during the sunset Mass.

Besides that, we also took the opportunity to repair and restore all buildings of our church. Based on observations, we realized that there was an urgent necessity to do this and had hoped to complete this restoration project before our 130th anniversary celebrations. Besides having changed the roof, repaired the cracks and re-painted the walls, we also upgraded the church’s audio-visual equipment to cater to the online Masses. Although we could not celebrate our 130th anniversary with this restoration and

upgrading project, I personally believe these improvements will enable us to continue many more anniversary celebrations for years to come.

“Outreach” with Limits

As this MCO was a new and unfamiliar reality for the whole world, we truly did not know how we could continue to reach out to the needy as a Church with so many restrictions imposed on our movements. At the same time, we had to face many challenges including not being able to come together in person to make plans. No collection of funds was possible due to suspension of public Masses and the fear of being infected with the coronavirus. However, we did not stop our outreach mission to the needy as we believe that they would definitely be in more urgent need of help during this MCO! During this period, our diocesan and parish’s existing *Sahabat Orang Asli* ministry, which does outreach work among the indigenous people of Malaysia (the *Orang Asli*) in the remote Orang Asli villages located within our diocese, managed to obtain permission and assistance from the state authorities to deliver food aid to some of the Orang Asli villages.

By the grace of God, to cater to the MCO needs, we managed to form an *ad hoc* team made up of people from different age groups and professions. We named the team “Emmaus” based on the Gospel reading of Lk 24:13-35, to make us conscious of the presence of the Risen Christ who is accompanying us in the midst of these challenging moments. As a result, we managed to reach out to various age groups within and outside our church boundaries. On top of this, we also reached out to the new “MCO-poor”, those who had temporarily lost their jobs due to the MCO. Besides providing basic food stuff to them on a regular basis, we also supplied them facemasks for their safety!

The MCO had also affected our children for they could not go to school. Instead, they were all expected to study online at home. We strongly believe in the importance of education and realised that many poor families did not have the necessary equipment or internet infrastructure

for studying at home. During this time, we got to know that the YTL Foundation, a charitable foundation backed by the publicly-listed YTL Group. This organization was offering poor families the opportunity to apply for and obtain free cell-phones with 10GB data plan per month for a year. After consultations with various parties including YTL personnel, we decided to assist families from the lower income groups to apply for this plan from the YTL Foundation, as many of these poor families did not know how to do this, or had the means to do so. Despite going through many challenges, we managed to help 107 families to make the necessary applications and 66 of them were shortlisted by the foundation and subsequently received their free cell-phones and data plan.

Despite the limits imposed on us in terms of movement and resources, we were glad that we were still able to help the needy. I believe the power of love in supporting one another, can help us to journey together in these difficult times. None of us should be alone for we have God and we have one another.

The Mission Continues....

To be frank, I really do not know for certain in terms of how and what to do during this MCO as we cannot plan based on the uncertainties presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, I strongly believe the mission has to continue as it is the very reason of the existence of our church. I thank God for His faithfulness in being with me while He sends many supportive SMC family members whom I can rely on to journey together. This is the greatest blessing that I treasure the most in the midst of this challenging moment for You are with us always to the very end of the age! (Mt 28:20)

Evangelization during COVID-19: Teamwork and Adaptability

John Uhal¹
(USA)

Three weeks before Easter 2018, only four months after my son was born, my pastor gave me news that my position of Director of Liturgy and Music at a relatively large parish in Le Mars, Iowa was to be eliminated. The whirlwind of unemployment finally came to an end in the summer of 2019 when I was hired as the Pastoral Associate for the Emmaus Pastorate, a cluster of the five Catholic parishes of Sacred Heart–Volga, St. Joseph–Elkader, St. Mary–Strawberry Point, St. Mark–Edgewood, and St. Patrick–Colesburg in Northeast Iowa. Having withstood the trying 15 months without ministry and only my wife’s income for our four-person family, I was very excited to begin parish ministry again in a similar yet also uncharted role under a pastor I had known for many years. My position was newly created, complete with liturgy planning, website management, catechesis, and music leading among my initial responsibilities. With bachelor’s and master’s degrees in theology, ministry, and music, my pastor thought I would be a young, intuitive, yet educated addition to the Pastorate’s growing staff, which largely relies on part-time employees and volunteers.

Such conditions are commonplace in our parcel of the wider church, and my new role began as expected. I was thrust into website development when

¹ John Uhal is Pastoral Associate for the Emmaus Pastorate, a cluster of the five Catholic parishes of Sacred Heart–Volga, St. Joseph–Elkader, St. Mary– Strawberry Point, St. Mark–Edgewood, and St. Patrick–Colesburg in Northeast Iowa, Dubuque Archdiocese. He is married and has two children. He holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees in theology, ministry, and music.

we switched website hosts during my first month, and eventually I began controlling most of our social media posts. I had never formally taught faith formation students, but I came to know my first class of nine, their interests, families, ambitions, and desire to know and understand the Church's teachings. I felt at home working with the choir at St. Joseph, which I directed every week at rehearsal and Sunday Mass. In addition, I quickly became familiar with the other parishes' musicians, musical preferences, and repertoire. Unsurprisingly, there is a vast difference among our five parishes when it comes to liturgy and worship, which is fitting since the Pastorate spans over 400 square miles!

As Christmas 2019 came to pass and my son turned two, reports of a mysterious virus from Asia began on most news outlets. At the time, we expected no ill effects since it was *there* and not *here*. Our ministries to homebound parishioners, nursing home and care facilities, Sunday and daily Mass schedules, faith formation classes and their scheduled activities, even office hours went on as planned during January, February, and March 2020. One of the goals our pastor introduced last year was to celebrate our parishes' feast days and make them annual causes for celebrations. So, St. Joseph prepared for a vigil celebration of the Solemnity of St. Joseph on March 18, which would conveniently coincide with our Wednesday night faith formation class. Complete with music and a reception afterward, it was to become a prominent annual celebration in our parish! The morning of March 18, however, officially marked the beginning of a new era.

As the final preparations were being made, I received the call from our pastor, Rev. John Haugen, saying Mass was to be cancelled that night. To date, the Sunday prior was the last time my choir sang together. Soon after, the Archbishop of Dubuque, the other three bishops of Iowa, and even the governor of the State of Iowa all declared that a host of activities were suspended until further notice, including religious services. All activity in our parishes stopped almost immediately and without much warning.

Faith formation classes, visits to the hospitalized and homebound, Sunday and daily worship were all stopped, and our three office buildings were closed. Staff was sent home, office phones were forwarded to personal cell phones or landlines, and eventually our churches remained locked during daytime hours. Shock and awe was felt by most of our parishioners, and our staff started crafting a response.

The work of Christ of course, indeed the Church's ministry, does not stop – how can it?! So, without the ability to gather in person, share the Eucharist, be anointed, share faith experiences, or provide assistance to passersby, our minds started rethinking ministry. The first mission was to communicate with our parishioners. Without in-person gatherings, we turned to our cameras, portable microphones, website, and social media. With few exceptions since March 26, 2020, our pastor has recorded a weekly check-in video every Wednesday. Although we have improved the technology and delivery since, the purpose was to provide a way for parishioners to see and hear their priest speak to their needs, elaborate on the scriptures of the previous and upcoming Sundays, and give hope and encouragement until the time we could go back to normal. Like St. Paul, we thought that time would be just a couple of weeks away, no more than one month at most. As weeks passed, such would not be the case.

With our offices closed and no Masses being celebrated, we turned to recording Liturgies of the Word with some music provided by yours truly. Beginning with just a tablet, we created videos of Sunday scriptures being proclaimed, preached, and sung which we then posted to our website. This lasted until the end of Lent. Every week our parishioners with internet access could watch a few prerecorded minutes of Fr. John on Wednesday and about 20 minutes of prayer on Sunday. Watch mind you – not truly participate in the moment.

As we reframed how to teach the faith to our youth, we researched new activities that could be completed at home. We contacted parents, encouraging them to ensure their children continued to learn their faith, even if not in a formal classroom setting. Of course, schools were also

closed at this time, so many of these students were either home alone or in whatever daycare facilities could remain open. Still others needed supervision at home, requiring parents to either take leave or stop working. In many cases, parents found the latter easy when their employers laid off or furloughed employees or simply closed their businesses altogether. This side effect of the pandemic is still wreaking havoc across the United States.

Not satisfied with the quality and recorded nature of our “substitute” prayer experiences, by Holy Thursday 2020 one of our more tech savvy faith formation directors invested in a portable camera, powerful laptop, and necessary software and accessories. Combined with my knowledge of our sound systems and liturgy and our collected creative ingenuity, we went live with our first ever livestreamed Mass. Over the previous weeks, I had been growing formation and virus response resources on our website; one of them was the addition of hosting livestreams. With less than 10 people in the entire church on any given occasion, we were able to livestream the entire Triduum and every Sunday Mass of Eastertide. Our online attendance began to grow, and today, we typically have around 1,000 people watching our weekend worship. Using our crude, temporary, and portable setup, we also livestreamed our annual Confirmation, the Archdiocesan Installation of Lectors, several baptisms, and baccalaureate Masses.

Beginning on Pentecost Sunday, the bishops of Iowa and our governor lifted both the moratorium on public worship and the number of people outside one’s household allowed under one roof. It was such a wonderful sight to see our churches filling with people again! No church was brimming with Mass goers mind you, but it was a joy to see God’s people able to worship in person once again. Since Pentecost Sunday, we have had in-person worship in our churches every weekend with two virus-related exceptions, and we have continued to livestream one Sunday Mass each week.

The advent of our livestreaming has spurred a few new upgrades to our churches, too. We typically do our livestreaming from St. Mark, the newest, most updated church with the best sound system of the five churches. So in November 2020, we installed a permanent, built-in camera

system which, along with an output from the sound system, is hardwired to a new computer in a small, repurposed usher's closet. St. Mary has just upgraded its closed-circuit television system with a new camera, and with its reliable sound system we can also livestream from there; Christmas Day 2020 was its inaugural stream. St. Joseph, the oldest of the five churches, needs the most updating, and its upgrade is now underway too. Our two smaller churches, Sacred Heart and St. Patrick are in rural areas without internet access. Rather than in the smaller church, St. Patrick parishioners enjoy a spacious, brand-new hall for their Sunday worship and other activities. Conveniently, this new structure was already in the planning stages prior to the pandemic. The new building is simple yet elegant, and it can serve a variety of needs all year long. New improvements are still being made, too. Sacred Heart has purchased a closed-circuit camera system to send video feeds of Mass to its basement in case of an overflow attendance. The plan is to continue livestreaming Sunday and holy day Masses from St. Mark, and after recruiting and training more ministers, it will be possible to regularly stream from our three largest parishes.

Besides being on camera, the way in which we worship in the Emmaus Pastorate has changed, too. To ensure social distancing, each of our churches sports welcome signs on the pews in which Mass goers can sit. Our only priest and musicians are now cognizant of a participating population spread throughout any number of local neighborhoods, towns, counties, other states, and (on occasion) other countries! We have also removed holy water from our fonts and hymnals from our pews. Instead, no one blesses with water unless at baptism, and everyone worshipping at home or in person receives a copy of our weekly bulletin, which includes a two-page worship aid. We have added tape to the floor so those receiving Communion know to social distance in line, when to remove their masks, and what direction to turn. To prevent spreading germs, all attending Mass are required to wear masks, sanitize when entering and leaving, and the congregation only sings at selected moments. The ordinary of the Mass, including the acclamations, are all recited instead of sung. Of course, the rites have not changed, but *how* we celebrate them certainly has!

When our churches reopened to the public on Pentecost Sunday, it was a joy to have more than ten people in the church! I felt the same on Christmas Eve when St. Joseph hosted almost 160 people in the church and parish hall. By no means was this considered a “full house,” but relative to the last few months it was a monsoon! Our other four parishes also saw increased crowds for Christmas. I admit it was a little heartbreaking when Fr. John announced reservations would be required for this holy feast. Truthfully, for months much larger parishes across the United States had already been requiring reservations or assigning families to a preselected Mass. Churches are only so big, and to ensure social distancing such measures were needed. Until Christmas however, the Emmaus Pastorate had not incurred flocks of people every Sunday; we always had plenty of room for people to sit while maintaining a recommended distance between households. But generally we experienced no backlash or frustrations with Christmas, and people who did call to reserve their space honored their reservation. We did not have to turn anyone away either, which certainly could have led to hurt feelings and bruised egos.

Christmas was not the only time large crowds have massed here since March. After receiving permission from the local ordinary, we offered outdoor general absolution on the last two weekends of Lent and again on the first three Sundays of Advent. In Lent, we simply used a portable sound system near the center of parked cars in our churches’ lots. It was effective, but we quickly discovered it was harder to hear in the back rows of cars. By Advent though, enough other churches had tried similar ventures, and technology had progressed and disseminated. We took the lead from our Protestant brethren and used an open radio channel to speak to parishioners parked in our lots. All they had to do was park, receive a worship aid, and tune their car’s radio! Considering how cold and windy December is in this part of the globe, it was a welcome improvement!

Traditionally, our five parishes host faith formation programs that coincide with our public schools’ calendars. Although we finished our 2019-2020 year in strange fashion, with First Communions, baccalaureates, and graduation ceremonies spread into the summer, we began the fall

in almost typical style. One of our parishes opted for a hybrid model with students alternating between virtual and in-person classes. Another resumed its usual weekly classes with surprising success. The others have opted for a variation on the two. In each parish though, we have mostly resumed the catechizing of our young people, and we continue relying on parents to do their part as the “primary catechist.” Our parishes have developed activities for home use, adapted our classrooms to allow for social distancing and disinfecting, and made use of video conferencing platforms for virtual-only classes and to accommodate students who cannot or will not join in-person gatherings. Students preparing for sacraments are also on track to receive them despite all the obstacles. Overall, the first semester has been a success, and with vaccines on the horizon, we look forward to continuing this year’s unusual learning styles and calendars.

Between experimenting with new technologies, upgrading our website and utilizing it more, altering our formation programs and annual parish activities, and modifying church layouts and worship practices, adapting to the newness thrust on us has become a second nature. Certainly, each parish in our Archdiocese has reacted to the virus’ very existence differently based on its staff, number of priests, the health of its clergy and staff, and its available resources. But I am very surprised that neighboring parishes (or clusters of parishes) have done very little adapting. Some have not heeded local government, citizen, or even parishioner calls for mask wearing; some of have not endorsed social distancing or receiving Communion in the hand only; and some are not making efforts to reach homebound parishioners and those voluntarily avoiding large crowds and public areas. It saddens me to hear experiences from Catholics in other parishes where pastors have chosen not to take precautions, and I know some of them have begun worshipping elsewhere because of it.

In another instance, a parishioner of mine was a resident at a nearby care facility, and she was nearing death. At the time, my pastor was under quarantine for having tested positive for the virus. When her son called me looking for a priest, I called one at a nearby parish, and he was surprised

I was even asking for his help! Despite the virus, I was disappointed that he was not willing to minister to a person close to death when nothing restricted such a visit. One week later, I sang at her funeral, and I have not seen her children in our church since. I fear a lack of fortitude and sensible adaptation may drive some people away from the Church permanently.

The pandemic has also changed the way we think about and communicate with our flocks. As we entered the first few months of the pandemic and began our livestreaming, my fellow staff members and I began to ask ourselves what effect our new ministries would have. In short, if we enable people to watch Mass online – be it live or recorded – are we enabling them to understand communal worship as optional, as unnecessary? If we can make Mass and other prayer experiences a mere convenience, will such an evangelization tool actually backfire? Will celebrating and receiving the Eucharist be undervalued? All coins have two sides though. By livestreaming the Mass, parishioners avoiding public areas and large crowds are rejoicing! Seeing their churches, their priest, their ministers, hearing familiar music, and knowing that it is all broadcast from just a few miles away (and not on a national cable network from a faraway cathedral) is a comfort and relief. We are now contacting nursing homes and jails near us to see how we can have our services made available to those populations.

The Emmaus Pastorate has also improved our use of email and social media posting. By using a messaging service, we have organized most of our parishioners into specific groups so that when we need to send emails regarding a specific ministry or activity, we only message those specific parishioners. We have thought carefully about how and what is posted (or not posted) to our website and social media platforms and when those posts are made. Although not specifically a result of COVID-19, these improved communication techniques have generally made us more effective evangelists.

The purpose of this volume is to collect reactions to COVID-19 from lay and ordained ministers' perspective. Since my position was created from nothing just nine months before the pandemic arrived in the United

States, it is hard for me to compare pre- and post-pandemic practices here in my five parishes. That said, in the first months of this pandemic, I have seen the way we minister, how we think about and communicate with our parishioners, and the ways we worship, change and adapt. Sometimes those changes have come week-to-week, and other adaptations have taken a few months to take shape, but the Emmaus Pastorate has morphed in a myriad of ways. I credit our generally positive response to a dedicated and creative paid and volunteer staff, an exceptional pastor, and a parishioner base willing to make and experience changes. These are qualities not always found in Catholic circles, but these blessings have continued our mission to evangelize and journey with each other on the road toward Christ.

A Future Full of Mysteries and Surprises

Dominic Nguyen Quoc Thuan¹
(Japan)

“Thank God for the things that I do not own.”
(St. Teresa of Avila)

As the year 2020 began, many people were filled with beautiful dreams, plans and aspirations for the new year. I also drew up a program for myself consisting of various trips and projects. But only two months after that, everything came to a halt and had to be cancelled because of the COVID-19 pandemic breaking out in Japan and throughout the world, and still going on in this year of 2021. It is not just myself, but perhaps many other people are still filled with anxiety and fear about the return of the new strain of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which has proven itself to be even more dangerous than before.

Nonetheless, as I write these words reflecting on the things that had happened in 2020, with all the cancelled plans, postponed projects and plans for the future remaining uncertain, I suddenly realize that indeed, the future is always a mystery filled with surprises and unplanned occurrences. At the same time, it is an opportunity to appreciate this dynamic life with its realistic and vibrant lessons, in accordance with the teaching of Jesus: “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Mt. 6:34).

¹ Dominic Nguyen Quoc Thuan is originally from Vietnam. He is presently serving as the pastor of Suzurandai Parish in Kobe, Japan. He has been serving in Japan for 12 years. Before being assigned to Suzurandai Parish, Fr. Thuan served as the assistant pastor at Fuse Parish in Osaka, Japan.

Lesson 1: “Do Not Worry About Tomorrow”

When Japan experienced its first case of COVID-19 infection on January 15, 2020, no one could fathom that a year later, the country would have a total of 310,708 cases of infection with 4,341 deaths. The city of Osaka has seen the highest number of deaths with 724 out of 37,000 cases of infection. Although the capital city of Tokyo has a population that exceeds Osaka by 4 million people, it ranks second with 717 deaths out of 82,000 cases of infection. The vast majority of the victims were either the elderly or those with pre-existing health conditions. Compared to the rest of the world (about 2 million deaths out of nearly 100 million cases), Osaka has a comparable death rate of 2 percent, while Tokyo has a lower death rate than the global average with less than 1 percent.

Like some people, looking at these statistics has sometimes filled me with anxiety as I think about the uncertain and seemingly hopeless future, not knowing what tomorrow will hold. Will I be counted among the victims? What will happen to my pastoral ministries? Where will I go in my life? Many other questions and doubts came to my mind. However, after a year of confronting these changes and chaos, I have also learned the lesson of trust, of appreciating life and living life in the present moment.

Trust

In April 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic was raging in Japan, I was asked by a family to anoint and bless their loved one who was suffering from COVID-19. I was quite worried because I was uncertain how to go about performing this rather dangerous task. When I arrived at the hospital, I had to follow very strict and detailed protocols so that I would not be infected by the virus or pass on the virus to others in case I was also infected. After that, I was directed to a quarantine room where I was able to access the patient through a screen. In the process, I had to be disinfected and wear the proper protective suit as directed by the careful guidance of a nurse who was on hand to assist me. Because I was not able to enter the room where the patient was lying, I gave the nurse the holy oil to take into the

room. As I stood in the room to which I was directed, I read the words of the Sacrament of Anointing while the nurse used a piece of cotton absorbed with oil to anoint the forehead and palms of the patient. Finally, I gave a blessing via the electronic screen before taking leave.

On the way home, I reflected on what I had just done and realized the true meaning of trust at a time like this. It is when human life is truly fragile that human beings seem powerless in the face of the pandemic and imminent death, the only thing left is to place complete trust in God. In this event, the prayer of Jesus suddenly took on tremendous meaning: “Father, into Your hands I commit my Spirit” (Lk. 23:46; Ps. 31:6).

Appreciating Life

When everyone was advised to stay home amid complete lockdown in the country, I had to stay in my room, doing repetitive everyday things, to the point that I became extremely bored. Sometimes, I wondered whether I was actually living or simply existing. What meaning was there to life when activities had to be limited, pastoral ministries had to be put on hold, and distance from other people had to be kept? I wondered what the future held for my life. Nonetheless, as I reflected on these questions and doubts in silent prayer, I discovered that life was comprised of moments to be appreciated and not meant to be a race with time, competition with other people, or a contest with circumstances. Realizing this made my isolation in the confines of the parish rectory a less lonely experience, knowing that “God is with you” – just as what I affirm to the faithful in every Mass that I celebrate. Additionally, I drew comfort and strength from knowing that thanks to the phone and social media, I was still in touch with friends, family, and parishioners in many different places. Being aware of this gift brought to me the lesson of knowing how to value the life that I had been given and to be grateful for the experiences that I had to face.

Living for the Present

During the pandemic, I often heard many people express regret about

the past using words such as “if only.” If only they had known about the pandemic, they would have saved more money. If only they had known what was to come, they would have tried to work harder to make more money. Other people do not express regrets about the past but complain about the future calling out to Heaven in rueful lamentations. “Heavens! When is this pandemic going to be over?” “Heavens! Why is my life so difficult right now?”

I myself sometimes fell into this state of mind – regretting the past, and worrying about the future. However, one particular time when I was ruminating in my room, I suddenly looked up and saw a scroll hanging on the wall. On the scroll was a Kanji word written in calligraphy: “今、
こころ”, translated “Hic et Nunc – Here and Now”. These words reminded me that I had to live completely for the present, for today and for this very moment. As for tomorrow, it has burdens of its own. This would be the second lesson that I learned during the pandemic.

Lesson 2: “Tomorrow Will Worry About Itself”

Nourishing spiritual life

When the pandemic was at its peak in March 2020, religious activities that required the gathering of people were forbidden due to the risk of spreading the virus in such an environment. In response to the calls by the government for people to stay home and practice social distancing, the Church decided to call off all religious gatherings and dispensed with the Sunday obligation. In place of these in-person gatherings were online Masses, Zoom meetings, and catechism classes. Amid this drastic change from the usual liveliness that took place in the city, I still left the church open for a few people to be able to come in every day to pray, participate in daily Mass, and receive communion. I also gave blessings to a few people who came each day. Indeed, at a time when one could not be in contact with many people and activities had to be severely limited, people could still turn to God as their only source of comfort and strength.

Caring for the elderly and the sick

With the elderly and the sick, a group of parishioners and I made small paper boxes in which the Eucharist could be placed. These boxes were then delivered to the people who wished to receive communion. After the communion had been received, the paper boxes would be burned, not to be reused again. By continuing this ministry in this manner, the faithful would feel that they were not isolated from God and the community. Despite the grave situation created by the pandemic, they were invited to continue to recognize signs of communion with God and with the parish community.

For myself, as there was more time due to the lockdown, not having to run around as before, I could spend more time connecting and communicating with the parishioners by way of social media applications such as Viber, LINE and Zalo. Having more time on hand and greater opportunity for reflection, I could also be more meticulous in preparing the content for the online live streaming programs or written Gospel reflections to be sent weekly to the parishioners.

Caring for the homeless and migrants

After two months focusing on pastoral care for my parishioners, I began to turn to the homeless and migrant workers who had lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic. In normal times, the parish community would organize a monthly meal for the homeless with about 120 meals. However, during the pandemic, the parish leadership decided to make this a weekly activity. In addition to the meal, each person would also receive masks and a bottle of disinfectant. As for Vietnamese migrant workers in the area, the parish also supported each person with a meal delivered to their door.

Through the various charitable outreach activities during the pandemic, what our parish community aimed to portray was a Church for the people rather than people for the Church. Indeed, due to the desire to protect life

for each person and for the entire community, the Church is willing to dispense with obligations and cancel regular activities. More than that, the Church aims to protect not only its members but everyone, especially those who are homeless and marginalized.

Walking with the world and humanity

According to the newspaper *Japan Times* (October 9, 2020), the number of suicides in August dramatically increased. A rather worrisome fact is that among the people who took their lives were many women and school-age people. It was surmised that this phenomenon was due to the psychological stress caused by COVID-19. The fact that while there were only 2,000 deaths due to the coronavirus, there were 13,000 suicides which were extremely disturbing to government leaders and social experts.² The feeling of having no way out had become a serious effect brought about by the pandemic.

In the face of this reality, our parish decided to establish a hotline where people could call to ask for advice or just to have someone to listen to their problems. The people who receive the phone calls are volunteers that come from the parish community. In addition to establishing the hotline, our parish is also using the parish website to communicate useful information about the pandemic and publish content that would provide spiritual as well as emotional support for the community and those who happen to come to our site.

Despite being limited in personnel as well as funds, our parish has managed to carry out activities that help to mitigate the pain and suffering of some people. These activities at the same time affirm the true nature and mission of the Church, which is for the people. And through these activities, I also learn my lesson about having “each day worrying about itself.”

² <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/10/09/national/social-issues/suicide-mental-health-coronavirus/>

Lesson 3: “Each Day Has Its Own Troubles”

Up to this point, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken away countless lives, forced numerous major companies to close down, small businesses to declare bankruptcy, and over 3 million people to become unemployed.³ The government has supported each person living in Japan with ¥100,000. However, this support merely represents temporary relief and demonstrates the leadership’s effort to address the problems caused by the pandemic. Welfare centers reported that in April 2020, 95,000 people had applied for assistance due to loss of employment. By July of the same year, this number decreased to about 40,000. However, government officials warned that the number of people needing government assistance might increase again after the country saw over 200,000 cases of infection with 2,800 deaths. At the time of this writing, the number of deaths has increased to 4,341 and the number of infections has reached 310,708 cases. It should be noted that the number of people who died by suicide due to loss of livelihood and family problems during the lockdowns has been estimated to be five times the number of deaths due to the coronavirus itself. From these statistics, we can see that the suffering that the Japanese people have experienced is tremendous. No one is sure what the final losses in terms of lives and livelihood will end up being. In terms of the Japanese economy, the negative effect that the pandemic is having on the country’s plans to host the Olympics only is estimated to be in the billions of dollars.

As for the Church in Japan, there has not been any concrete statistics about the number of Catholic deaths. However, due to the restrictions placed on church activities, the number of people coming to church has been markedly decreased. This reality presents a challenging future prospect for the pastoral worker, not only within the confines of the parish but also in social outreach programs. In addition, the pastoral worker has to also expand the field of pastoral work to not only the physical space but also the virtual space on social networks. As affirmed by the Scriptures,

³ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/05/21/business/job-loss-coronavirus/>

God is always a God who wants to meet and dialogue with humanity. God is willing to become “Word” (Jn. 1:14) to be one with humanity and for humanity. God always searches out ways to connect with humanity. Therefore, the Church has to imitate this way of God in order to be near the people in order to accompany them and share in their lives.

With a combination of hardware (computers, mobile phones, tablets, iPods) and software (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Zalo, Viber), the Church has continued to communicate not only about God and about itself, but also walk with, listen to, and meet everyone. Especially during a pandemic when people have to confront loneliness and isolation, the use of digital technology proves to be the safest and the best solution for interpersonal communication and other forms of exchanges that would not drive up the infection curve. In addition, when pastoral workers resort to modern digital communication technology, they not only prevent self-isolation and detachment from the happenings of the world, they can become more keenly aware of the events taking place. More importantly, the presence of the pastoral worker in these virtual spaces and social networks can help to transform what is “virtual” to become “real” and what is “false” to become “truth”. This is all the more necessary in the face of the tremendous amount of disinformation and misinformation on internet forums that would benefit from the injection of the Good News. Ultimately, the pastoral worker aims in every action to mitigate the pain and suffering faced by humanity.

Conclusion

When the year 2020 began, everyone wished for a perfect year of being 20/20 in every aspect. In reality, the pandemic took away all the plans and projects and left many people with nothing. A practical perspective of these events could lead one to feel discouraged, hopeless and filled with despair. Nonetheless, if one can retain a hopeful outlook, the year 2021 could still be an opportunity for rebuilding and recreating, starting with oneself, then extending to family relationships as well as other social relationships in the most beautiful and perfect way.

The Church also has the opportunity to see more clearly its role and position in modern society and in the heart of contemporary humanity. Pastoral workers themselves can recognize their ability to respond to the changes taking place in the world and to take the appropriate steps toward better self-cultivation and self-transformation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impressed on humanity many valuable lessons to help us live better with what we have and to be able to distinguish between what is essential and non-essential. The pandemic has also helped humanity to be able to appreciate life and not just exist, only to realize that “I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true’” (Rev. 21:1-5).

Church and Pastoral Care during the Pandemic in Europe

Nepolean James Raj¹
(Belgium)

Introduction

Despite its remarkable economic growth and advancements in medical science, Europe felt powerless when it was challenged by the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic in the year 2020. In many western European countries, hospitals reached their maximum capacity when the inflow of COVID-19 patients became unstoppable. The Church, which is expected to offer hope and faith in times of troubles and uncertainty, was forced to close church buildings and cancel all its pastoral activities. Despite

¹Nepolean James Raj, originally from India, is presently a PhD researcher at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at KU Leuven, Belgium. He is in his fourth year of doctoral studies. In his doctoral research, he explores the role of Mary in contemporary theological debates. He investigates the Mariology of two theologians belonging to two distinctive fields of liberation theology: Mexican American/Hispanic theology and feminist theology. His recent publications include: “The Image of Mary in the Magnificat: Mary’s Hope as Spark, Small but Unquenchable,” in the conference proceedings entitled *Hope: Where Does Our Hope Lie?* Bratislava: International Theological Congress of the European Society for Catholic Theology (ESCT), 2020, 123-139; “Maria, zuster of moeder? Het antwoord van Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort,” in Mathijs Lamberigts and Leo Kenis, eds., *Montfort en de montfortaanse beweging in België (1920-2020)*, Antwerpen: Halewijn, 2020, 118-139 and “The Sacramental Significance of Pilgrimages,” in Adrian Florentin Crăciun, André Lossky, and Thomas Pott, eds., *Liturgies De Pèlerinages*, Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2021, 131-147.

the difficulties and restrictions imposed by the government, the Church discovered many means to attend to the sacramental, liturgical, and spiritual needs of its faithful. As the more than two thousand years of the history of Christianity bears witness to the dynamic evangelization and unquenchable missionary zeal of Europe, so the pastoral creativity undertaken by the Church in Europe during the pandemic proved her continuing love for Jesus and motherly care for her children. In this essay I describe how the Church in Europe² has managed to offer pastoral care and sacramental/liturgical service to its faithful during the pandemic.

From a Christian Continent to Secular Europe

If anyone makes a short travel through Europe, he/she will realize how integral Christianity is to the history of European civilisation. Whether it is a plain or hill, city or village, the landscapes of Europe carry the mark of the rich Christian tradition. Although Christianity was brought to Europe from the middle-eastern countries through early Christians, Europe became home and center of Christianity from very early centuries onwards. One cannot deny the prominent role of Europe in shaping world history and her impact on building the civilization of almost every country in other continents. Theologians such as Virgilio Elizondo aver that Europe achieved her political and religious victory side by side; conquests/colonization and evangelization went hand in hand.³ The magnificent cathedrals, centuries-old churches and small grottos along

² Most of the statements that I make in this article are the outcome of my service as an assisting priest in two of the pastoral zones/units in Mechelen-Brussels diocese in Belgium. The general statements about Europe do not refer to the whole Europe but the western part. Before writing them down I consulted some of my friend-priests who are assistants in Germany, the Netherlands, France, and Italy.

³ See Virgilio Elizondo, *La Morenita: Evangelizer of the Americas* (San Antonio, TX: Mexican American Cultural Center, 1980); *Guadalupe: Mother of the New Creation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997); “*La Virgen de Guadalupe as Mother and Master Icon for the New Evangelization*,” in Michael E. Connors, ed., *To All the World: Preaching and the New Evangelization* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2016), pp. 12-21.

village roads and city streets remind us that the history of Europe is through and through Christian. Until the previous decade the Catholic Church was led by European leaders. And until recent times missionaries went from Europe to the other parts of the world. But after the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church and Christianity in general have begun to decline in European countries. Europe, which was home to a majority of practicing Christians, can no longer claim to be the center of Christianity. Churches are no more crowded, and church attendance among young people has fallen to a minimum.⁴ In some European countries the practicing of Christian faith and attending liturgical services in the churches seem to have become an activity of the aged and the retired.

The Church in many European countries is witnessing not only decline in church attendance, but vocations to priesthood and religious life are also few. As a result, many churches which functioned previously as parishes have been grouped together to form a pastoral unit or pastoral zone. This pastoral unit or zone is led either by a theologically trained lay person or by a priest. Thus, many dioceses are making efforts to respond effectively to this unfavourable situation. Even some dioceses are borrowing priests from Asian, African and Latin American countries to compensate for the scarcity of priests. It is in this context that I have been given an opportunity to serve in one of the dioceses in Belgium. I am asked to help as an assisting priest in a Marian Shrine in Flanders. I have been helping in the shrine for the past three years, and from this year onwards, I also serve in a pastoral zone. In my homeland India, churches are crowded; and in order to avoid the overcrowding in the churches, some parishes organize ten Masses or more on Sundays. Before coming to Belgium, I also served as assisting priest in one of the parishes. There, I was used to celebrating the Holy Eucharist in crowded churches. But I was shocked to see not many people for the Holy Eucharist when I did my first Mass in one of the parishes in Belgium. Only a few came for the Mass and these few people were mostly aged and retired. The questions that flashed in

⁴ For an overview of the Church in Belgium see www.jaarrapport-kerk.be

my mind were: What happened to the Christian faith in Europe? Why are the churches empty? Why are the parents with children and young people not coming to church?

Nevertheless, it was a great consolation to me when I went to serve in the Marian Shrine. Although it is not as crowded as it was the case a few years ago, people came on pilgrimage in groups to this shrine and church attendance was reasonably encouraging. I had a much better feeling in Lourdes when I went there for hearing confession during summer; out of my six years of stay in Belgium, I went to Lourdes almost every year except this year. Lourdes continues to attract a lot of pilgrims and during the summer it is crowded and busy, thanks to the advancements in air transport and mass media communication. Although we can find believers in these pilgrimage sites, many parishes are undergoing a sort of death-experience. Many parish churches have been closed and the closing of many more is inevitable in the coming years.

Already facing a bleak situation, the coronavirus pandemic is indeed a further tragic blow to the Church in Europe. The pandemic forced the small number of people who were coming to the church before it appeared to stay home altogether. Belgium is heavily affected by the pandemic in Europe, while the European continent lost more lives to COVID-19 than other continents in the world. I, too, had to remain in quarantine for two weeks because I came in contact with an infected person. The dangers presented by the virus forced countries to go into lockdown and to impose strict border controls. The sudden imposition of the lockdown gave the Church no choice but remain silent and powerless. During the first lockdown many parishes remained closed and cancelled all their public services because they were unprepared to respond to the sudden emergence of this situation. However, despite the fear and frustration created by the pandemic, the desire to attend to the pastoral needs of the people has pushed the Church in Europe to seek out various solutions to respond to the crisis. I applaud her for undertaking creative efforts to respond more effectively to the challenges posed by the pandemic.

First Lockdown, Restrictions, and Pastoral Response

When the imposition of the first lockdown went into effect, the Church in Belgium remained silent for a while. However, after a few weeks it began to use digital communication media to attend to the pastoral needs of the faithful. Church leaders and pastoral workers began to encourage everyone to avail themselves of the liturgical services offered through digital media. People who were ordered by the government to remain home were happy to attend the Holy Eucharist on television or other digital platforms like Facebook and YouTube. For a while, it seemed to be an appropriate solution to the prevailing life-threatening situation. Of course, people were happy to take part in the Holy Eucharist on these digital forums; however, some felt that they were too artificial because of the impossibility to receive Communion during online Masses. Some people called me asking whether they would be able to come to the religious community where I was staying to make confession and receive Communion. During the first lockdown when the government began to permit the families to receive one visitor in their home, an elderly couple who are in their eighties came to me for this very purpose. When they telephoned me, I discouraged them not to make any travel, but they dared to make the trip by train and reached my religious community which lies 60 kilometres away from their home. As I was not permitted to take them inside our residence, they stood outside, made their confession and received Communion. After thanking me, the lady remarked, “Now we are at peace because we are now ready to travel to God’s heavenly home.”

The first lockdown was more fatal and tragic to aged people who lived alone or in homes for the elderly. To help those people and also many more who live alone, the diocese has set up a telephone service to listen to them and render pastoral care. Yet, the loneliness and stress undergone by the elderly is more devastating. Affected by COVID-19, many died in homes for the aged without even seeing their loved ones for the last time. At the moment of death, their family could not morally support them with their presence by their side.

Although the Church could find a solution in digital forums for helping people attend the Holy Eucharist, it had to either stop or postpone many other pastoral activities such as the First Holy Communion, Baptism, Marriage, and Confirmation to a few months later. This postponement was not difficult to the Church, but the celebration of funeral liturgies was the most difficult. A funeral ceremony in the presence of family members of the deceased was not possible. In order to prevent the spread of the contagious virus, many church funerals were conducted in the presence of only one or two family members. Many families could not bid farewell to their beloved deceased. However, with digital technology, the one or two family members who were present could then film and broadcast the ceremony to other members of the family. Those who could not attend in person must be content with this virtual ceremony because this was the only means of consolation available to them under the circumstances.

The pain experienced by the family members and the guilt feeling that continues to haunt them are depressing and tormenting. The words of one of the lectors who helped me in the Holy Eucharist still rings in my ears. He is in his late 60s. During the first lockdown, I called to say hello and check on him. After enquiring about his health, I asked him about the health of his wife. He began to cry and expressed no words. I remained silent for a minute and asked whether everything was alright with her. He said, "Father, I lost my wife to this deadly virus." After that he continued to weep again. In the months of April and May 2020, an atmosphere of widespread fear, suspicion and sorrow prevailed in many European countries. In the first lockdown the empty streets and the gripping calmness made the cities look as if they were haunted. During my evening walks, on some days I could hardly see anyone on the street. The churches remained closed from the last week of March to the first week of June in Belgium; all the pastoral services were cancelled. The Belgian Church celebrated and conducted the Holy Week Services and Easter entirely online and streamed them through TV, Facebook, YouTube, and church websites.

Reopening of Churches

In Belgium the churches were reopened in the second week of June 2020. But we were asked to conduct the services in accordance with the regulatory measures issued by the government. The Holy Eucharist was celebrated with a limited number of people. Other liturgical celebrations and sacraments were administered in the presence of a small group of people. In the first week of reopening, merely forty people were allowed to attend the Holy Eucharist; but the number was gradually increased to 100 in the following weeks. However, we were asked to conduct the Sacraments of Baptism, Marriage, and the funeral liturgy in smaller numbers.

When churches were open again and more people could attend the Holy Mass, in the churches in which I was helping, people's participation had drastically reduced. Due to the pandemic, almost all the pilgrimage sites in Europe such as Lourdes, Fatima and the local shrines in Belgium where I do service remain closed. One of the mission activities of our congregation is also to take people on pilgrimages, but in 2020 we cancelled all our pilgrimage trips. I was scheduled to guide one group to Lourdes and another to India, but these plans had to be abandoned. Although many people hesitated to arrange their marriage function because of the many imposed conditions which must be strictly followed, the church permitted the parishes to organize the First Holy Communion and the Confirmation in September. Since the number of people for the celebration should not exceed 50, we organized the services in two groups in my parish. We organized two Eucharistic celebrations and administered the First Holy Communion to children. But the Sacrament of Confirmation was not administered to children in the Mass. There were 34 children to be confirmed and they were divided into seven groups. Not to exceed the limited number, five children with their parents were allowed to enter the church for the Confirmation. Thus, the presiding bishop gave a short introduction, read the Gospel and said a prayer seven times before anointing them one by one. Although most parents do not come for the Sunday Mass with their children, they usually take part in

organizing the First Holy Communion and Confirmation with enthusiasm and due preparation to show love for their children. However, in 2020 these activities were not possible. Baptism and the liturgy of funeral were conducted with attendance limited to 15 participants. Sadly, after a period of relaxation of the restrictions, the government has imposed the second lockdown after the feasts of All Saints and All Souls.

Second Lockdown

While many parishes were not prepared to face the first lockdown competently, parishes did not find the lockdown any longer an obstacle for rendering pastoral care to the people. In the second lockdown which was more relaxed than the first one, almost all pastoral zones/units began to stream online Eucharistic celebrations.⁵ Many abbeys and monasteries also started to do the same. In this way, people are offered many possibilities to take part in the Mass and other pastoral activities online. Shrines and monasteries/abbeys also stream the liturgy of the hours, adoration, retreats, prayers services, and recitation of the rosary online. Baptism, funeral, and marriage liturgies are allowed to be organized with a limited number of attendants. The government allowed churches to celebrate the Christmas services in a group of 15, a regulation that caused quite a bit of tension among parishioners (it is not advisable to call a selected few while excluding many others who are regular for the Sunday Eucharists). As a result, almost all the churches chose to celebrate the Christmas Mass online accompanied by a choir and a few ministers to assist in the Mass.

Faith and Pastoral Care

Perhaps Europe continues to be known as a Christian continent, but practicing Christians are now few in number in many western European countries. However, there is still a remnant of the traditional Christianity and they follow Christian values with heart and soul. At the time of this

⁵ One may type “Kerk Hoegaarden” on YouTube to view the online Masses which we began to stream in our pastoral zone during the second lockdown.

writing, there is an online petition to gather 25,000 signatures calling on the government to permit Eucharistic celebrations to be celebrated in the churches in these times of the pandemic rather than forcing them to remain closed like that of restaurants and cafes. They have already collected 13,000 signatures. After the first lockdown when the Marian Shrine was open, the Rector of the Shrine asked me to serve in the house of blessings. Many other priests who serve there are aged, so I did the blessings alone for three hours on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. Normally, the house of blessings is open from 10 am until noon, and from 2 pm until 5 pm every day. But to avoid spreading the infections, the Rector had decided to keep it open only on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. On a few Sundays, I stood almost three hours out to bless the cars. It was so busy that on a particular Sunday a man waited almost three hours in order to make a five-minute confession.

During the second lockdown, which is still going on as I am writing this essay, many churches are choosing to live stream the Holy Masses online rather than to celebrate it with a maximum number of 15 people. As a result, there are a few people who regularly come to our religious community to receive Communion. Because they are not permitted inside the building they stand outside, and after preparing them with a moment of prayer I give them Communion. And the mails continue to be circulated to get more signatures to urge the government to let more people attend the Holy Eucharist.

Coping with the Pandemic

In many ways, the pandemic has been extremely detrimental to the Church in Europe. After having gotten used to online Masses, it is uncertain how many may still have interest to come to church to attend the Holy Eucharist after the lockdown has been lifted. I say this because the great majority of those who were coming to Mass before the lockdown were the aged and retired. Despite the decline, the Church seeks new means and ways to revive the Christian faith in Europe. Many dioceses are entrusting the role of leading the parishes, parish units or zones to lay persons. Even the pastoral

zone where I am assisting is led by a woman who does many tasks except for celebrating the sacraments, which belongs to the priest like myself.

New pastoral undertakings and creative initiatives introduced by the Church for re-evangelizing or newly evangelizing Europe have doubled during the pandemic. In my pastoral zone, we are advising people to postpone baptisms and marriages. But we stream the Holy Eucharist and take Communion to individuals who request the service. I greatly admire the freedom and readiness of the pastoral caregivers and assistants who enthusiastically accept the new proposals that I present to them, such as making the Masses available online. Although we do not yet have a professional camera, we use the smartphone to film. We record the Mass beforehand and stream it on Sunday morning at 10.30, at our usual Sunday Mass time. Right now, the members of the pastoral administration are planning to buy a professional camera to film the Holy Eucharist in order to enhance the quality of the videos.

In addition to streaming the Mass on Facebook and YouTube, we have utilized the popularity of the weekly magazine of the Church in Belgium, *KERK & leven*,⁶ to maintain a good connection with the people because most people who come for Sunday Mass are subscribers to this publication. In this magazine, we provide all the information regarding the Mass in our pastoral zone and many other churches, monasteries, abbeys, and shrines in Belgium that also stream the Mass. The links and the websites are also listed. Thus, through Facebook and YouTube, we pastorally serve many people during this ongoing pandemic. In order to make the pastoral worker more accessible to the faithful, my phone number is also provided in the magazine, and many people call me when they feel lonely and contact me when they wish to receive Communion.

Because the choir could not be present for the Mass, I initially started to use a small bluetooth speaker to play music during the liturgy. But after a few weeks, I started singing Flemish hymns and also hymns in my mother tongue, Tamil. People appreciate my pastoral creativity and applaud my enthusiasm

⁶ One can find more information regarding this weekly magazine in www.kerkenleven.be

and efforts. The lady who is in charge of the pastoral zone is very much pleased by the growing number of viewers. She herself has to be applauded for drawing the attention of the parishioners by promoting in the weekly magazine the creativity, newness, and the way the Mass would be conducted every week. Her weekly write-up in the publication has contributed to much greater enthusiasm on the part of parishioners. Hence, despite the non-professional quality of the video, our parishioners still take time to attend the Holy Eucharist in the digital platforms.

No doubt, our effort at pastoral creativity is an invaluable consolation to people who desire to be sacramentally nourished. Yet there are obstacles because the way the pastoral zones/units are structured prevents them from effectively responding when confronted with a sudden difficult situation. Decisions cannot be taken by a single person. The members of the pastoral administration must approve a new pastoral idea before it can be implemented. Due to the age of some members and their lack of knowledge in using technology, they cannot participate in Skype meetings. Even if the members are young and well-informed, the scarcity of the finance prevents them from undertaking new initiatives in pastoral zones. Pastorally creative ideas involving new communication technology oftentimes cannot reach aged people who do not know to use technological gadgets and are unfamiliar with social media. However, these people attend the Holy Eucharist which is streamed on TV through the Church in Belgium and other countries as well. Pastoral initiatives during the pandemic were also often hampered by government restrictions, which greatly limit what churches are able to do. Hence there is an online campaign to gather signatures which I have mentioned above. Yet, there is a cordial relation between the State and the Church in Europe; they have amiably worked together to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

An undeniable fact is that the pandemic has caused unforeseen changes in Europe. Europe and the Church could have fought the pandemic more efficiently and saved many lives if the fatal nature of the virus were taken

more seriously before the situation worsened. Measures such as imposing lockdowns and prohibiting unnecessary travels could have been taken in a more timely manner. Mistakes in addressing the pandemic have resulted in devastating consequences for Europe in terms of lives and livelihood. The fear and anxiety caused by the pandemic will linger in the minds of people for some time to come. The Church in Europe faces many uncertainties about what would be the condition of the pastoral life post-pandemic. Nonetheless, the pandemic has taught church leaders and all pastoral workers invaluable lessons. The Church has learned to make use of new forms of communication technology in order to maintain relationship and connection with the faithful. Press and digital media have served to affirm to people all over Europe the motherly care that the Church longs to give to her children. She has gained deeper knowledge of new media which can be of great help in the new/re-evangelization of Europe.

The Church's greater use of new communications technology has helped the call to young people reach their ears during these times of lockdown and loneliness. Young people, who remained months long in their home and used digital forums for work and for news/information over the pandemic, have come to know how the Church desires to serve them pastorally. The pastoral creativity effort which she has undertaken will help her present herself as a mother who is always there to serve, comfort, console and care rather than to rule, build hierarchy, judge, or condemn. People will realize that the sacramental and liturgical services she renders are neither outdated nor superstitious but an opportunity to grow together in solidarity and universal fellowship. The Church is not a place of dead rituals and sentimentalism but a community which celebrates life in Christ and radiates love. I believe that the challenges presented by the pandemic has actually equipped the Church with more tools to creatively and efficiently perform her pastoral activities with renewed enthusiasm in the new era which has already dawned during the pandemic.

Pastoral Creativity in Parish Ministry during the Pandemic

Henry Siew¹
(Singapore)

Due to the pandemic, Singapore society is locked down to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Subsequently, there are measures to ensure safety by limiting the number of people allowed for social gathering. Places of worship are obliged to limit the number of worshippers. These measures have disrupted the regular worship and activities of the parish. We have to find new ways to engage the parishioners and keep them connected with the parish.

The first step we took was to ensure we get familiar with and make use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram and YouTube; and with video conferencing tools, such as Zoom meeting and Team link. All the parish groups are encouraged to use these means to continue with their regular meetings, and to hold group prayer and faith sharing.

However, some members are elderly and are not tech-savvy. The

¹ Henry Siew was ordained to the priesthood in 1991 and serves in the Diocese of Singapore. He was an assistant priest in two parishes before going to Rome for studies and obtaining a License to teach philosophy and later a doctorate degree in Philosophy from Fujen Catholic University, Taipei. He is now the Parish Priest of Church of the Holy Cross, the Spiritual Director of the Commission for Apostolate of Mandarin Speaking and teaches Philosophy in the local major seminary. He has published a few books in English and Mandarin, including *Follow Christ, Be a Catholic, the Smart Way of Loving* and *Pitfalls in Christianity*.

ministries leaders are encouraged to reach out to them and assist them in the use of various apps for connection and communication. For example, catechists reach out to parents and ensure their children participate in online catechesis.

To encourage and assist Catholics to read the Bible and to meditate on the word of God, I have since the beginning of the COVID-19, write daily Gospel reflection in English and Mandarin to guide the parishioners in their daily Bible reading. The reflection pointers are shared using social medias such as Telegram and Facebook.

The parish organized online faith formation sessions on pastoral and Biblical topics, such as the Old Testament and the New Testament Bible Heroes Series. Interestingly they attracted higher number of people to participate, even more than pre-COVID-19 time when we had in-person sessions. Also, the participants are more punctual and attend more frequently.

The faith formation sessions are recorded and uploaded to the parish YouTube channel so that those who missed the live sessions could later refer to the uploaded videos for nourishment. These videos could also be viewed by non-parishioners and therefore reached a wider audience.

We also organized online prayer sessions using devotional prayers such as the Divine Mercy chaplets and the rosary. These sessions were well attended because people saved time from not having to travel to the church premises. When the restriction for gathering were eased, we conducted Holy Hour in a “hybrid form”, with limited number of people participate on site, and others by watching live streaming.

For parishioners who are unfamiliar with English language, a few priests have been invited to record their daily Mass in Mandarin and upload to YouTube for the whole diocese. The daily Mandarin Mass has a viewership of close to four thousand while the weekend viewership is about seven thousand people.

Realizing that some elderly people who do not speak Mandarin had not been able to attend physical Mass even when the churches reopened for worship, I have also made the effort to record short Bible sharing in the dialect of Teochew for their benefit. This effort was very much appreciated by the nearly 300 local Teochew speaking Catholics in the community.

Our Parish Feast celebration consisted of an online Triduum of Masses, preceded by the airing of a series of short videos on “The Cross of Love”. Community events included Bible Quiz and Parish Knowledge Contest using “Kahoot!”. There was also a Musical and Bingo Nite with lucky draws, with which parishioners had a recreational evening.

During this Advent Season, we organized two projects and invite the parishioners to participate using online forms. The first project concerned corporal work of mercy and the second concerned spiritual work of mercy.

The first project was called “Christmas Giving 2020”. Two forms were used by people who participated in this project, one for donors and the other for recipients. Donors signed up and ticked the kind of gifts they would like to offer and submit their donation by online payment. The gifts included vouchers for the purchase of groceries, meals, toys and books. The applicants used another form to submit their request for gifts. The recipients of the program needed not be destitute. They could be families that had been financially tight and would appreciate an extra Christmas cheer. This project benefited 102 families.

The second project was entitled “Advent Intercessory Prayers”. In this project, two online forms were designed, and people could register as intercessors or petitioners. Those who registered as intercessors committed themselves to pray for the specific intentions submitted by the petitioners. Those who requested for prayer were encouraged to also take on the role of intercessors who would pray for others.

This period of pandemic has been a challenging time, and our Parish

Pastoral Council has adapted to the changing social reality, and to use creative means to serve the pastoral and spiritual needs of our people.

Masses and Funerals: The Surviving Liturgies amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

Clement Baffoe, SVD¹
(Australia)

Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic has forced many doors to shut and the Church has not been spared. Whereas most sacraments have either been rescheduled or cancelled, Masses and funeral services have been ongoing throughout the pandemic with a limited number.

From the outset, I must state that this essay is from a deacon's experience. Having been ordained a deacon on 15 March 2020, I was full of enthusiasm wanting to go to the parish to serve and to learn. Unfortunately, on 17 March, that is two days after my diaconate ordination, the Australian Prime Minister announced Stage-3 lockdown which meant that all churches were to close their doors to public worship. In fact, the announcement broke my heart since all my plans of meeting the people were dashed. Nobody knew when the church would be opening again. My plans of reviving the youth and children ministries were ruined and I initially thought my diaconate pastoral activities were impossible.

¹ Clement Baffoe, SVD is a member of the Society of the Divine Word, Australia Province. He is originally from Ghana. He was ordained to the diaconate on 15 March 2020, just as the pandemic was breakout in many countries around the world, including Australia. His experience recounted in this essay is from his ministry as a deacon. He has since been ordained to the priesthood on 28 November 2020, also as Australia was dealing with the effects of the pandemic.

Then I realised that one way to minister the Word of God to the people was through a written homily. I started writing my homilies and they have since been printed for parishioners who live nearby or posted on the parish website for everyone to access. Within the same week of the lockdown, we saw quite a few parishes that had begun streaming their Masses online. We first observed some of those Masses for almost two weeks before we started ours. In this essay, I would like to describe how the St. Martin De Porres Parish, Avondale Heights, Melbourne, has conducted Eucharistic celebrations and funerals during the pandemic.

Online Masses

Masses or the Eucharistic celebrations are “the source and summit of the Christian life.”² And so, although we could not meet our parishioners in person to celebrate Masses with them, we resorted to social media to reach them. A parish which hitherto had no YouTube channel had to create one and also reactivate its Facebook page which was almost defunct. Through all these, I reflected that the prophetic words of the Second Vatican Council which say, “All the children of the Church should join, without delay and with the greatest effort in a common work to make effective use of the media of social communication in various apostolic endeavors, as circumstances and conditions demand”³ was becoming a necessity. Moreover, the pandemic has made it necessary for us evangelizers to embrace wholeheartedly the various media available to us. Besides Facebook and the YouTube channel, the parish has connected with parishioners through phone calls, emails, parish newsletter and text messages. Since we cannot do home visitations, the phone calls have been very significant in checking up on parishioners

² Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*), in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, vol. 1 new rev. ed. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1998), # 11.

³Vatican II, *Inter Mirifica*, (*Decree on the Media of Social Communications*), in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, vol. 1 new rev. ed. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1998), # 13.

in these difficult times.

Preliminary Observations

Before we started recording our videos, we had seen numerous Facebook live Masses and we had our concerns. Firstly, some of these live videos had poor visual quality; the sound was not the best and there were a few network interruptions in some videos. Although some people might say it's the prayer or the Mass that is important, the medium of broadcasting equally counts. Due to the poor quality, some of the live videos did not create the ambience and the decorum for prayer and worship. In fact, some Eucharistic celebrations were mere theatrical performances and we had to guard against that.

What is more, another issue that we found with some other liturgies was their excessive length. Even though people earnestly want to pray, it is hard for them to follow never ending Masses on a screen. Sometimes the homilies were too long or there were parts that could have been not filmed. We decided against having a live Mass. Against this backdrop, our parish decided to look for a professional videographer to do the recording. The advantage of having a professional videographer is that, he or she comes with good microphones and light panels which help with the sound and video quality. Fortunately for us, our videographer decided to do it without charge; however, we insisted on giving him some token. He now records each Mass on Thursdays and edits it so that by Saturday afternoon, it is already on the Parish Facebook page and the YouTube Channel. By editing the Masses, he is able to make the Masses more time efficient. We always post the Masses before 4 pm every Saturday evening so that parishioners can prepare themselves adequately to join in. At first, we posted the videos after 6 pm or 7 pm, but some families complained that this was too late and hence the reason why we do it by 4 pm nowadays.

My parish priest is in charge of two parishes and so we chose to alternate recording the Masses in both churches in order that parishioners from the different parishes could feel the sense of belonging and ownership. Since

we have a big number of Vietnamese in the parish, we also record a Mass for the Vietnamese community every weekend. The recorded Masses are posted on YouTube and also our Facebook page. The priests and I forward the links of the Masses to the various people on our WhatsApp lists and phone contacts.

The parish has two schools and the schools help by sending the links to the parents of our students through the schools' databases. Interestingly, our Masses are sent to family and friends in India because the Assistant Priest is from India, to Vietnam because the pastor is from there, to Europe, America and Africa, my home continent. Moreover, some neighbouring parishes have also been following our Masses here. Some nursing homes near the parish have been given a memory stick with the recorded videos so that our elderly parishioners in nursing homes can also follow. There are weekends that we have had about one thousand people following the Mass but mostly it's around seven hundred views for both our English and Vietnamese Masses.

At times when the lockdowns permitted, we invited one or two parishioners every week to do the readings for the Masses. Inviting a parishioner to read helps to bring a representation of the people who could not be present physically. We connect with parishioners by also putting the names of their recently deceased relatives in the prayers of the faithful. It is always a great joy for those who come to read since their coming also gives them the opportunity to receive the Body of Christ sacramentally. Before the prayer after Communion, we pray the Act of Spiritual Communion with and on behalf of the congregation. It is worth mentioning that almost every week we have had parishioners send emails thanking the parish for bringing them to Mass. Also, the online Masses have given the parishioners the flexibility to pray. This is because, instead of all the parishioners gathering to pray simultaneously at a fixed time, families decide their own convenient time to join in the Mass. Some parishioners have requested that Masses be recorded even after COVID-19. Personally, I am not in favour of this, since the Church is a community that needs physical, rather than virtual, people to build it. Most families watch together on a television screen and we

have heard stories of parents that make sure all the children are in their best clothes before they come to 'attend' Mass.

A few parishioners have specifically given donations for the video recordings even though we have not asked for this. The contributions to the parish finances have mostly been done through direct debit but there are parishioners who drive to hand in by cash. They are mostly the seniors who are not used to the credit/debit card systems.

Even though we do not broadcast our weekday Masses, three of us gather for Mass every day and pray for the intentions of our parishioners and the world. We are just three men at our weekday Masses; nonetheless it's fascinating when we say in the Confiteor '*and (to) you my brothers and sisters*' or when the Celebrant says: '*Pray brothers and sisters...*' whilst addressing the empty pews. What always comes to my mind is '**presence in absence**'. Although our parishioners are absent physically, in spirit we still acknowledge their presence in the pews.

Funerals

At the parish, we normally celebrate at least two funerals every week. Unlike the other liturgies like baptisms, confirmation and weddings that have either been postponed or cancelled, funerals continue to be celebrated. I guess it is a huge cost to have a body in the morgue for several weeks or months. But most importantly, the cost of a family's grief is unbearable should they keep their dead relative for long.

Here in Melbourne, before our second outbreak we could at one time have up to fifty people at funerals. Now, funerals can have only ten people not including the officiating ministers. Funerals during this time of COVID-19 have become difficult for most big families since they mostly struggle with who should attend and who to stay back. We have had instances where more than ten people had come to the church for a funeral service but the rest had to stay outside and peep through the church's glass windows. It is a painful scene to behold but that is all they can do. I do feel for

families planning funerals since the process of selecting people could pose a dilemma. When the choices are not well made, it could also create some future enmity between family members. Funeral directors are always available to take the contacts of all attendants for contact tracers in case there should be any COVID-19 case.

What is more, nowadays we have to rush funeral services or liturgies since staying indoors for more than an hour is not encouraged. Since families do not invite people other than their intimate family for funerals, some even decide not to prepare a booklet, a eulogy or photo presentations. The parish, though, still encourages families to at least do the eulogy and the parish prints the booklets free of charge for families. Most funeral services are streamed live so that the rest of the family and friends who could not be there could follow from home. It is interesting to mention that Maltese and Italians have a tradition whereby they take the body to his or her home before they head to the cemetery. Recently, I followed a family to their house for the said tradition and I witnessed something quite moving. The deceased must have known most neighbours but due to COVID-19, they could not attend her funeral. As soon as the hearse arrived at the house, most of the neighbours came to their driveways to bid her their last farewell. This tradition somehow gave the neighbours the opportunity to be part of the funeral.

In addition, due to the pandemic, the normal hugs and kisses that families give each other especially during their saddest moments are not allowed. Most funeral directors have always been quick to remind families of the virus. Family gatherings after the burial have also been made impossible especially in times of the Stage-4 restrictions in Melbourne. It is indicative that COVID-19 has added a huge amount of sadness to the grief of bereaved families. However, I have observed that discretionary spending that came with funerals pre-COVID-19 has been eliminated. Families do not need to organize any lunches or receptions anymore.

Lastly, I have spoken to some bereaved families who have appreciated the fact that there are few people at the funeral. According to them, without

a crowd, they have been able to connect, bond and mourn appropriately as a family. They think this opportunity to grieve is rare when there are too many people around. With less number of people, each becomes a participant rather than a spectator. This is because, the lighting of the paschal candle, the placing of the pall, the readings, the eulogy and the carrying of the casket is shared among the ten people and everybody gets to do something significant.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has made most public gatherings impossible but ministry still has to take place. Social media has become a primary means for reaching parishioners who have become home bound. In this essay I have shared the experience of my parish but specifically about online Masses and funerals, the two most common liturgies now. Our initial concerns with the online Masses were video and sound quality, moderate Mass duration and avoiding interruptions either with network or intruders. The online Masses have given parishioners and even people outside our parish the opportunity to share in Eucharistic celebrations. Since these Masses are on Youtube, families have the chance to participate in them at their own convenient time. There is no rigidity around Mass times.

Also, in this essay I spoke about funerals as one of the few liturgies still taking place since it is emotionally and financially unthinkable to postpone funerals until post-COVID-19. Due to limited numbers, some bigger families have struggled with selecting who to attend. In instances where more people have attended, ten stay in the church and the rest participate from outside. For some families, the fewer numbers at their funeral has given them the opportunity to participate actively, fully, bond with one another and mourn their dead appropriately. The excess cost that came with funerals pre-COVID-19 has been eliminated in most funerals now. From the point of view of a pastor or deacon, the COVID-19 restrictions have allowed us to cherish moments with parishioners. Due to the lockdowns and less pastoral duties, we are able to spend quality time with bereaved families when they come to plan for funerals. Above all,

we can now spend quality time in prayer for the needs of our world and the needs of our parishioners. Lastly, we can also spend an appreciable amount of time with our fellow community members.

My Pastoral Diary during the COVID-19 Pandemic

John Baptist Trinh Dinh Tuan, SVD¹
(Chile)

The Pandemic and the Church in Chile

Since the beginning of 2019, the entire world began to take notice of a deadly virus originating from Wuhan, China and subsequently spread around the globe, wreaking havoc on many countries, especially China, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom, North America and eventually South America. The pandemic spread with unprecedented speed, and as of 1 January 2021, the world saw a total of 83,527,738 cases of infection and 1,819,905 deaths.

The pandemic caused entire countries to close down. Places of gathering such as schools, shopping centers, and places of religious worship also faced closure as national leaders tried to flatten the infection curve. These measures of course would bring about devastating effects on local and national economies as well as the livelihood of billions of people. For many, this pandemic would leave traumatic memories that they will not soon forget.

¹ John Baptist Trinh Dinh Tuan, SVD is a Vietnamese missionary priest in the Society of the Divine Word. He studied psychology at Van Hien University in Ho Chi Minh City, and philosophy and theology at the Dominican Institute in Ho Chi Minh City. He was ordained in 2015 and was assigned to serve in Chile. Presently, he is the assistant pastor of Espiritu Santo Church, Fresia, in southern Chile.

The Catholic Church was not excluded from the deleterious effects brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Church doors around the world were forced to shutter, and traditionally important celebrations on the liturgical calendar such as Lent, Holy Week, Easter and Christmas had to be scaled down a great deal or could not even be celebrated with physical liturgical gatherings altogether.

In Chile where I am serving as a Divine Word missionary, the people are also having to deal with the grave consequences brought about by the pandemic. Although the coronavirus came to Chile relatively later than other countries, infecting its first patient on 3 March 2020, by 1 January 2021, the country has had over 600,000 cases of infection. At this time, the pandemic has claimed 16,660 victims, according to the Chilean Ministry of Public Health. Although the national leadership has implemented multiple measures in order to address the pandemic, the rate of infection in Chile is still high, especially in large cities such as the capital city of Santiago, Valparaíso, Osorno, and Puerto Montt.

Places of worship along with other venues of large gatherings such as schools, restaurants, tourist destinations, etc. were forced to close at the end of March 2020, and have only been allowed to reopen in a limited manner recently. Facing this grave national situation, the Bishops' Conference of Chile has on multiple occasions published pastoral letters calling on the faithful to be united in prayer and in concrete acts of charity with one another. The Chilean Church especially emphasized the vulnerable people, including those who are homeless, immigrants, and the neglected. During a period of three months in which the pandemic was at its peak, the various dioceses initiated programs to help those in need through donations of money, food, and necessary goods. Based on reports about these efforts, the charitable initiatives received a wonderful response from the faithful. Everything that was collected was taken to the diocesan center, and then redistributed to parishes and individuals who were most needy, in accordance with the situation of each location. In addition to the diocesan initiatives, many local parishes also organized efforts to cook and deliver food to poor families in the community.

Through these various means, the local Church contributed to helping the greatest victims of the pandemic to make it through the most difficult times of the pandemic.

Ministry at My Parish during the Pandemic

The parish of Espiritu Santo, where I am the assistant pastor is located in Fresia, a small city in the south of Chile; there are also 8 communities in the surrounding areas which are under our care. The pastor is a fellow Divine Word Missionary from Indonesia. Most of the people in the region are engaged in agricultural work for a living. There is a number of people who are government officials or engaged in businesses. Unlike the large cities of Chile, the number of people infected by coronavirus is not high, and the degree of negative effect of the pandemic is also not as serious. The people most affected by the pandemic, however, include foreigners who work seasonally in the area, people who do not have a stable job, the elderly, and those who suffer from various illnesses.

In the face of the pandemic that came suddenly and affected the entire society, foreign missionaries like ourselves not only were worried about our own health but also about what all this would mean for our ministries and community life. Nonetheless, amid the anxieties and concern, as pastors, we had to figure out some way to maintain the faith life for our flock as well as to assist in the material needs of those who were facing difficulties.

In order to help those most affected by the pandemic, our parish pastoral leadership decided to make a survey of the community and identified families and individuals who were in need, so that we could collaborate with the Caritas program of the diocese in order to provide assistance as possible. As missionaries largely relying on the people for our living, we had no spare funds to help those in need. Thus, we had to depend on the generosity of those in the community who were better off to share with their fellow parishioners. We became a bridge of love and communion, connecting the flock with ourselves and the members of the church with

one another, creating a strong bond that could resist the destructiveness presented by the coronavirus pandemic.

During times when the church must be closed in accordance with government regulations, our parish celebrated Sunday Masses and other Solemnities, which would be live streamed on Facebook and broadcasted on the local radio station. Each day, we prepared a reflection of the Word of God, which we broadcasted on the radio. We also uploaded the text of the reflection onto the parish Facebook page, and sent them to the parishioners through a text messaging application. Although we did celebrate weekday Masses, these liturgies were limited to a very small number of people and were not broadcasted or live streamed.

Celebrating the online Masses was not at all easy for me. I was not especially excited about the prospect of an online liturgy, where I would have to stand alone on the altar, facing and preaching to empty pews. I could not think of a more forlorn experience for a pastor of a church. In addition, as a foreigner still not yet fluent in the local language, I face the challenge of not always being able to express what I would like to say. Normally, this challenge would be faced only in the confine of a kind and understanding congregation. Now, it would be faced in cyberspace where there were no boundaries as to who would be listening and making judgments on what I was saying. Thus, besides having to deal with an empty church, I faced the added pressure of having to be more careful in what I communicated in the liturgy, especially in the homily.

Despite these obstacles, I could not ignore the pastoral needs presented to me, and so delved into these foreign territories with trust in God's grace that I could fulfil my duties to help those participating in my online Masses to receive the necessary nourishment for their spiritual life. Until now, I believe that my faith and trust in God's mercy has paid off because I have not received any negative feedback from the parishioners or anyone else.

With or without the pandemic, there would always be people who are sick or pass away. With the sick, we continued to visit them wherever possible,

and when necessary, to administer the last rites. When there were deaths, including those caused by COVID-19, we accompanied the families to make funeral arrangements and celebrate the funeral rites. These activities would have the attendance of close family members, and always taking the necessary precautions in order to prevent the spread of the virus in the community. In these traumatic times of the pandemic, the presence of priests along with our prayers was a source of great comfort for those who had lost their loved ones.

What was most important for us in our accompaniment and communication to the flock, whether in deeds or in words was the encouragement for them to persist in faith and prayer so that they would find the courage to steadfastness to make it through these difficult times. We encouraged them to be patient waiting for the day when they would be able to physically participate in the Mass and receive the physical Eucharist. For many in the congregation, the online liturgies had the effect of making them realize how much they longed for the celebrations where they could gather in church.

Unfortunately, one of the most regrettable consequences of the pandemic, which our parish could not overcome was continuing the catechism program for children preparing for First Confession, First Communion, and Confirmation. Because of limitations in our parish and the limitations imposed by the pandemic, we could not gather the children for catechism, thus delaying these very important milestones in the faith lives of our young parish members.

Pandemic and Religious Community Life

As mentioned previously, I live in community with a fellow Divine Word Missionary priest from Indonesia. Admittedly, the pandemic presented numerous obstacles to our pastoral ministry. It also prevented us from freely going about as in the pre-pandemic days. Everyday life and ministry became more or less limited to the grounds surrounding our church and community residence. Nonetheless, the situation also provided us a chance

to make use of the time that we had to nurture and reinforce community life. The members in our religious community had more time to talk to one another, to pray together, and to share meals together. Like many people in our parish, the condition of the pandemic also forced us to live more simply, surviving with only what was truly necessary. Usually, part of our community income comes from Mass intentions and donations made to the parish, which helps us with the church and community expenses. With church doors closed during the pandemic, this source of income was no longer available to us. Fortunately, our community has a number of rooms that are rented to people. Thus, during the pandemic, we were able to make ends meet with this source of income.

Living more simply during the pandemic was itself a gift. Not only did the fact that we did everything ourselves, such as cooking, cleaning, cutting the grass, gardening, and manning the office cut down costs, it also created community spirit and helped us to use the extra free time in a more useful manner. It also helped us to deal with the consequences of the pandemic in a more healthy way.

The pandemic also gave me more time to read and write. I took advantage of the extra free time to translate and publish a book entitled *The Five Minutes of the Holy Spirit* by Victor Manuel Fernández into Vietnamese, my native language. This effort represents my own contribution to the mission in my native country.

Personal Reflections on the Pandemic

Despite all the challenges brought about by the pandemic, under the light of faith, I am able to recognize the will of God for humanity as well as positive points for reflection:

First, the pandemic has helped us to recognize how much destruction humanity has brought upon the natural environment. The amount of pollution that humanity produces, especially in large industrialized cities around the world is cause for great alarm. The activities of economic

development, transportation, and preparations for international wars, etc. result in massive amount of chemical and noise pollution around the world. With the pandemic putting a break to many of these activities, changes in the natural environment, which also had the opportunity to rest, could be observed. The positive transformation reminds us that giving nature the chance to rest and recover should not be something that we are forced to do, but should do on a regular basis.

Second, the pandemic also brought about changes in marriage and family life. In the modern age where economics regulate people's daily activities, many parents do not have time to take care of their children, and husbands and wives do not have time for one another. The lack of intimacy in marriage and family life can lead to cracks in relationship with serious consequences. The opportunity for family to spend time together during the pandemic, eating together, taking care of each other, talking to one another... is an extraordinary phenomenon that could be observed in many families around the world during this time.

Third, transformations have also taken place in our faith and the Church. Perhaps for a very long time, the faith activities of Catholics have been carried out more or less as a habit. People go to church at the scheduled Mass time, celebrated in a predictable manner by their parish priest. Going to church has become not only a habit, but also a tradition. In many places, the parish priests directs the activities of the community, and the faithful passively follow as directed. The pandemic has upended these familiar ways of living out our faith life. The priests are not always able to direct, and the faithful have to take charge of their own time and way of worshipping and praying within their own household. The faithful has to learn to be their own "presiders" in managing and directing their own faith life and those under their care. During the pandemic, we truly saw and understood that indeed, the family is itself a small church community.

Finally, the pandemic gave the opportunity for the Church to demonstrate its very nature, which is Communion. There has been no other time that

we could see the sense of being of one heart and of one mind as during these trying times. All of God's People have to deal with the same situation. No matter if one is rich or poor, living in a developing country or a wealthy one, anyone could be infected with the virus and can die from it. Facing this grave situation, all must pray and cry out for God's mercy and love. I believe that this unity in prayer is what is needed from the People of God around the world so that God will grant us the necessary graces to survive the difficulties of this pandemic.

Lessons from the Pandemic

As a foreign missionary, the pandemic has taught me a number of practical lessons that would do me well to remember even after the pandemic had passed. In terms of pastoral work, I realized that I needed to practice to adapt to sudden and unforeseeable changes. When lockdown was enforced and church doors had to be shuttered unexpectedly due to the surging of the pandemic, the only way to communicate with the people was through communications technology such as telephone, email, radio and social media. Thus, a pastoral leader and a missionary in the modern age, no matter where he or she works, must be familiar with communication technologies and be able to employ them in the pastoral work. Nonetheless, besides having the skills to use communications technology as an instrument, the content of communication cannot be overlooked. The message is important, not just the medium.

Second, the role of the pastor always includes the work of encouraging love and mutual support among members of the flock. My parish is located in a region where there is a great degree of discrimination along the lines of skin color and social status. There is separation between those who are of German descent and the native people of Mapuche. There is also division between those who are wealthy and those who are poor. The COVID-19 pandemic was an opportunity for us to call for unity, for mutual concern and support among people of different backgrounds and social positions. Somehow, with God's grace, our calls were responded with overwhelming outpouring of love and charity from the people.

Third, being a missionary is not just about being able to do skillful things, but also about doing the little things in everyday life. The pandemic with all its limitations imposed upon us made us realize that the missionary did not just preach and carry out development projects, but also had to be able to do ordinary things like cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, gardening, and fixing broken things in the house. The reality of the pandemic informed me that oftentimes, the simple tasks are just as important and meaningful as the big ones.

Finally, the pandemic has also opened up new insights regarding religious and missionary life. In the past, many priests and religious missionaries spent a great deal of time busying themselves with all kinds of ministries – celebrating the sacraments, visiting the sick, administering hospitals and schools, teaching, and engaging in social development projects, etc. These meaningful ministries caused them to constantly go about and spend time on their work, while not leaving much time for community and personal prayer life. The coronavirus forced, and consequently, helped them to take a break, to spend time resting, to give more attention to personal spiritual life and community life. The events of the past year have highlighted the importance of members of the community staying home together, having conversations with one another, and sharing in the small tasks that are essential to the daily life of the community. Indeed, the pandemic has reminded missionaries like myself that all these times, we have invested time and effort in helping and preaching to others, but have often forgotten about our own well-being. The reality of the pandemic is itself a reminder that God wants us to make time so that God can teach us and give us spiritual nourishment.

God's will is always mysterious and beneficial for humanity. With my own reasoning, I am only able to recognize a limited number of aspects related to the pandemic. But I truly believe that God's will is far beyond the little things that I have managed to understand based on my personal reflection. The pandemic, at the moment of this writing, has not ended. We must continue to place our trust and hope in God's providence, as well as be steadfast in faith and united in prayer. We pray and trust that God is accompanying and protecting us through these unprecedented times.

Connection, Isolation and Love in the Time of COVID-19

Patrick Carl P. Gunnacao¹
(Philippines)

Once upon a time, a prosperous and united society decided to build a tower tall enough to reach heaven. They built it because they wanted to make a name for themselves and because they did not want to be scattered across the world. It was called the Tower of Babel. As the story goes, when God saw how proud the people became and how they began to think that they could do anything, He confounded their speech and made them speak many different languages so that they could no longer understand each other. Because of the confusion, they abandoned their ambition of building the tower and scattered themselves around the world.

As children, we were taught that God confused the people's speech because they wanted to be equal with God. We were taught that the Tower of Babel symbolized humanity's arrogance, pride and disobedience to God and that He brought confusion to their speech because he wanted them to learn humility. The Tower of Babel became the myth of the

¹ Patrick Carl P. Gunnacao is a seminarian for the Archdiocese of Manila, Philippines. He received his Bachelor's and Licentiate in Philosophy from the Ecclesiastical Faculties of the University of Santo Tomas. After working for a while as a support staff in the Human Resources Department of the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Manila, he went back to the University of Santo Tomas for a Bachelor's degree in the Theology as well as Licentiate and Master's degree Theology specializing in Pastoral Communication. He is currently assigned in San Felipe Neri Parish in Mandaluyong City for his Vocation Synthesis and Pre-diaconate Program.

origin of all languages. Looking at this story from the point of view of the pandemic we are experiencing, I could imagine how the people of the Tower of Babel questioned themselves after God decided to confuse their language and scatter them around the world. We often hear people nowadays ask: “Is it humanity’s fault that God sent this pandemic? Have we been too sinful? Have we become too materialistic?” In a way, it feels like a Tower of Babel experience once again wherein, because of the pandemic, we are forced to be separated from each other; we are forced to disconnect from our friends, family and our normal way of life. From this perspective, the story of the Tower of Babel feels more like a story about connection – with God, with other people, and ourselves.

CONNECTION. This was my initial concern when the coronavirus pandemic struck. It forced us to lock ourselves in our own homes, isolated and apart from the friends and colleagues we usually spend our time with. We had to depend on the internet connection in order for us to function: whether it was work, shopping, school, relationships, and even the Eucharistic celebrations. Many, if not all, had to make a big leap from the old-school to the digital world in order to survive. There was also a real fear of missing out on what was happening in the “outside world”. This fear necessitated being connected and updated through the internet, and the lack thereof often resulted in anxiety and depression. Internet connection seemed so vital during the first stages of the pandemic. Churches, especially given the restrictions, quickly tested the live stream waters in order to still be able to bring the Eucharistic celebration to the people, knowing full well that the spiritual nourishment would be of great help and consolation in the time of crisis.

The San Felipe Neri Parish in Mandaluyong City, headed by our parish priest, Fr. Ramon Merino, immediately coordinated with the San Felipe Neri Catholic School and our Parish Social Communications Ministry in order to set up live stream Masses. With the help of our Parish Pastoral Council, we also coordinated with the local village officials in order to allow us to carry out a procession of the Blessed Sacrament in the streets, granted that the people would not go out of their houses during the event.

We processed the Blessed Sacrament in a different area in the parish every day after the morning Mass.

During these processions, I would often see people, especially the old, with tears in their eyes, praying out loud that the pandemic would soon be over or being thankful that we were making the effort to bring the Blessed Sacrament to them. Seeing these reactions, I could not help but realize that, despite being able to attend Eucharistic celebrations online, the sense of spiritual nourishment and presence is still different when it takes place in person. The “personal touch” of actually being there gave them a deeper sense of spiritual connection than attending live streamed Masses. One parishioner even sent us a message thanking us “for bringing God to them”. In a way, it was fascinating to see how people hungered for God, and yearned to be able to attend Mass in person again. For many, being isolated in their own homes seemed to have a negative effect on their sense of belonging to a spiritual community and often resulted in anxiety and loneliness.

With this observation in mind, I experimented on posting a general message on my Facebook account hoping and praying that everyone was okay, healthy, and safe from the virus, as opposed to messaging random friends one by one, even those I had not been in touch with in years. The individual messages received more appreciation over the Facebook posts primarily because through the messages, people felt a genuine concern for their well-being compared to a post addressed to the general public. It also gave us a chance to catch up on what each had been preoccupied with while in quarantine.

With these findings, I organized a “Zoomustahan”(a portmanteau for “Zoom” and “kumustahan” which means “catching up” in Filipino language) with our Parish Youth Ministry Officers to ask each of them about their experiences and realizations so far in this pandemic, and to express their prayers for the world, each other and for themselves. I was surprised that some of our Youth Officers spent most of the lockdown period in the provinces at the insistence of their families, and that many of

them had relatives who passed away during the lockdown. It was inspiring how most of them had a positive and even prayerful outlook toward the virus outbreak and focused more on what they were able to gain from their experiences. After the sharing of experiences, I encouraged them to conduct their own “Zoomustahan” with the other youth members in our parish. This is in order for all the youth in our parish to still have the feeling of being connected to each other, albeit virtually. We received good feedback for the effort to virtually reach out to our youth, but we were also confronted with the harsh reality that many of our youth could not join in on our “Zoomustahan” due to the lack of access to good internet connection or even decent gadgets.

On June 6, 2020, despite not experiencing any of the symptoms, I tested positive for the coronavirus using the swab PCR test. I was immediately relocated to an isolated place for quarantine. As a policy, I could only be officially declared free of COVID-19 if I consecutively tested negative for the virus twice. While I was in quarantine, I tried connecting and reconnecting with friends to wish them good health and safety. I read some books and kept myself preoccupied. I also tried to connect with myself and enjoy my solitude. Although it was initially very fruitful and productive, eventually, idleness and boredom caught up with me, and soon I was longing to get out of my isolation and quarantine. I experienced, first hand, how people felt being deprived of human contact, of going out, and of being able to attend Mass in person. It felt as if I was an animal confined in a cage, being brought food, with nothing to do all day but lounge around. The delay of my swab test results only worsened this longing and made me miss “the outside world” even more. In the end, I was officially declared cleared of the virus on June 30 and was allowed to go home the next day.

The experience of being infected with COVID-19 and having to be quarantined opened my eyes to what those who had been infected truly suffered from: ISOLATION and LONELINESS. The lack of physical touch or contact with people was a big factor in creating the disposition of those who had been infected. Even after I was declared virus free, and

was asymptomatic, people made efforts to avoid me. It felt like I was a leper shunned from the community and considered unclean. Despite this, I tried to hide the hurt I felt when people avoided me and did my tasks as I normally would.

Then one day, a friend who found out that I had recovered from COVID-19 invited me to donate plasma for a coronavirus patient confined in a hospital. I was hesitant at first, but I remembered St. Teresa of Calcutta saying that “the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is LOVE.” It was a perfect opportunity to show my love to a stranger as well as a good chance to pull me out of my loneliness and jumpstart my connection with people. After donating plasma, I made an effort to try and reconnect with people and not let the trauma pull me deeper into despair. I even got a chance to reconnect with a friend who is currently in Japan and who was having personal problems and needed someone to talk to. It took a while before people in our parish began being comfortable around me again. I repeatedly made the joke that people who recovered from the virus were safer to spend time with since we already developed antibodies against the virus which meant we were more resistant to being infected. I also started having quick chats with servers in our parish asking how their time spent in quarantine was. It took a while before I felt connected with people again.

The feeling of being connected, whether it is connection to friends and family, connection to the “real world”, connection to the internet, and especially connection to God seems especially vital in this time of crisis. With isolation and social distancing being a necessary precaution against the virus, it is easy to feel alone in these troubled times. It is easy to feel left out or even shunned by people. It is easy to feel lonely. We should remember that these lonely moments, these dark and seemingly cold moments, can be opportunities for us to feel God’s warm love and share that love to others; to reach out to people we have not talked to in a while; to reach out and pray for the people we have hurt; and to help and comfort people who are suffering more during this pandemic.

Parish Pastoral Work during the Coronavirus Outbreak

Lu Yunqiang¹
(China)

The coronavirus outbreak has intervened in the order of human life through and through since the beginning of 2020, the year of Jiazi in the lunar calendar. It was so serious that transportation was discontinued, lockdown enforced, and markets suspended. Every family was asked to stay in their own house. Those who were not able to come back to their own hometowns then were simply forced to stay where they were. It seemed that everyone, in one way or another, was isolated from the rest of the world. People had to wear facial masks wherever they went. Instead of shaking hands or giving hugs like before, people tended to nod at each other when they met and kept a distance of at least a meter for safety purposes.

The coronavirus outbreak affected pastoral work in the whole nation. For the Catholic Church in Northern China, where I am presently serving, chapels had to implement the policy of “double suspension” which was to close chapels to the public and to suspend all liturgical activities. Like most of the priests from this region, I have gotten used to celebrating the Holy Eucharist with only several people attending in person. On Ash Wednesday of this year, instead of going to the chapel, the faithful

¹ Lu Yunqiang, from the Diocese of Zhaoxian, Hebei, China, entered the minor seminary in 1997. He studied Philosophy and Sacred Theology at Shenyang Major Seminary from 2003 to 2009. After graduation, he served at the Pastoral Center of the Diocese of Zhaoxian. He was ordained into the Presbyteral Order on July 31, 2012. Since then, he has been doing pastoral work in the diocese of Zhaoxian, China.

were asked to stay at home and pray. Ashes were put into packets and dispatched to each family. Even the Easter Triduum celebration was marked with simplicity and silence with a small number of people in attendance.

After hearing the daily news about those who died of the coronavirus, people from all ranks have realized the fragility of life and touched the fear which has never felt before. As a sign of God's love to humanity, it is more urgent for the Church to pay greater attention to human spiritual health. Currently, every parish priest is facing the same challenge: how to provide pastoral care for the laity in the condition of Mass-and-gathering-suspension. In line with this, after an online meeting, several priests in the parish have come up with a pastoral plan. The outline is as follows:

1. ***Building a network of communication.*** It is encouraged for priests to build a variety of parish-wide or compound-wide networks for the purpose of communication. It helps priests to maintain contact with parishioners and provide all possible guidance for them. As we all know, nowadays the internet has the power to attract people's attention and even control their ordinary life. All kinds of instant videos, computer games, and even online gambling, etc., have enslaved countless people. Presently, it is a clear fact that it is only possible for those people confined at home to reach others and have entertainment through the internet. In itself, the internet is neutral as long as people put it to good use. It is quite necessary for priests to guide people who may reach God's hands and sanctify their lives through proper usage of the internet. Thus, to maintain an effective communication channel is the precondition for information transmission.
2. ***Bible animation.*** Transcription of the Bible made by all people is highly appreciated. Both adults and children could register their names in a baton-passing form in the network groups which are aimed to transcribe a certain book in the Bible within a designated time. During the first few days, priests may give the announcement

every night about the number of people from different chapters who have joined this programme. Such a way of competition both stimulates people's enthusiasm and inspires more to study the Word of God. A week before the agreed time, people may apply to join a group for the transcription of the next volume. It is worth noticing that among those who have joined this programme, some may be as young as 7 years old or as old as 80. They walk side by side and leave no one behind. (From time to time, they take pictures of their work and send to the group platform. In this way, they profess their faith in God and encourage one another.)

3. ***Pastoral care to the family.*** It is necessary for priests to remind parents of their duty to bring their children to God through daily prayer, especially the Sunday liturgy. Before Sundays, priests send the file of the Liturgy of the Word, which is prepared beforehand, to the network groups. Members of the parish may have their family prayer at an agreed time (9:00 am or 3:00 pm). Each family would choose a certain place and create a prayerful environment and do some necessary preparations, such as table covered with white cloth, candles, and the crucifix, etc. They may take some pictures of the prayer activity and share with the group members afterwards.
4. ***Bible classes by cloud.*** It would be beneficial to those parishioners who have transcribed certain volumes of the Bible to attend cloud classes. The follow-up classes given by professionals or scholars could give them a deeper understanding on the Word of God plus their effort in transcription is already a good preparation.
5. ***Broadcasting the Holy Eucharist.*** Broadcasting the Mass could be a possible way for parishioners who could not attend the Holy Eucharist in person. It should be noticed that parishioners can only attend those which are presided, or at least permitted, by their parish priests. While attending the Mass in a spiritual way, parishioners need to have proper attire, gestures, and environment.

It would be much better if the head of the household could lead the whole family to “participate” in the activity with respect. It should not be done while laying down on the bed or doing something else at the same time. As much as possible, it is always good if those who “participate” in the Mass in this manner to attend it from the beginning until the end.

6. ***Religious formation for children.*** Each family should pay attention to their children’s religious formation, especially within the family circumstances. Nowadays, parents find less and less time to have a heart-to-heart communication with their children. Some families, beside filial relationships, do not even have a common language between parents and children. Family tradition has been lost. The time in which family members spend together should be regarded as opportunities to nourish the children’s faith in God. Parents may teach their children to lead the Grace and the Thanksgivings, morning and evening prayers, etc. It is good for parents to take videos about their family prayer and send to network groups that they may encourage one another. Afterwards, the parish may give some prizes to those children who have done a good job in prayer.
7. ***Collaboration within the local church.*** It is good to make good use of the available resources in cooperation with the diocese. Those priests, religious sisters, and the laity who are professionals in a certain field may provide online training classes, such as Bible Seminars, Liturgy and Sacred Music Workshop, Parent-child Relation Development, English Seminar, and Lector Training Programme, etc.

In conclusion, despite of the inconvenience caused by the coronavirus outbreak, we need to keep our burning passion for God. Our body may be confined by the world, but our heart should be open to God. During the past years, our hearts have been extremely burdened with concerns about material goods that we hardly found time for our family members.

Now, it is time for us to press “the pause button” and to spend time with our children and our parents. Moreover, in the light of faith, it is the time given by God for us to improve our faith and to nourish our soul. Together, let us cherish this precious time and opportunity.

PART II

TEACHING AND FORMATION MINISTRY

Sustaining and Nourishing Friendship with People with Different Developmental and Intellectual Abilities in Times of COVID-19

Joseph R. Quane¹
(USA)

SPRED (Special Religious Development) is a lifelong faith formation ministry for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) of all ages. In SPRED, small communities of faith made up of catechists and people with IDD are formed. Each person with IDD is placed in an age-appropriate group which allows them to relate to the life experiences of others in the community. Within these small communities of faith, the catechists and people with IDD journey with each other as they grow in their faith and deepen their relationship with God. The SPRED community of faith shares a special bond of communion and unity, where each recognizes their life-giving role within the community.

¹ Joseph R. Quane is the Executive Director of the Special Religious Development Program (SPRED) for the Archdiocese of Chicago. He graduated with a Master of Arts in Pastoral Studies from the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and received a Certificate of Studies in Lay Ecclesial Ministry from the University of Saint Mary of the Lake in Mundelein, Illinois. He also holds a Bachelor in Business Administration with concentrations in Accounting and information Systems from Loyola University Chicago. In addition to his work with the Archdiocese, Quane also serves as an Adjunct Instructor of Information Systems at the Quinlan School of Business of Loyola University Chicago. Prior to joining the Archdiocese in 2020, he worked 12 years at CME Group as an IT Business Analyst and Data Investigator within the Market Regulation Division. During those 12 years, Quane volunteered with SPRED at his local parish and at the Archdiocesan SPRED Center.

While these have been challenging time for the SPRED ministry, the pandemic has not been able to weaken the bonds that exist within my SPRED community.

The SPRED ministry was founded in 1966 in Chicago, Illinois by Fr. James McCarthy. While serving as an Associate Director in the Office of Confraternity of Christian Doctrine for the Archdiocese of Chicago, Fr. McCarthy discovered that parents had been inquiring about a program that would help their children with IDD become prepared to participate in the liturgical life of their parish. They also wanted their children with IDD to be able to receive the sacraments. At the time no catechetical program existed for people with IDD, so Fr. McCarthy decided to research the possibilities of establishing a catechetical program for people with IDD. While Fr. McCarthy was conducting research with Sr. Mary Therese Harrington, SH, they discovered the writings of Fr. Eucharist Paulhus from Sherbrook, Canada, who wrote his doctoral thesis on religious educability for children with mental impairment, and Fr. Jean Mesny from Lyons, France, who developed the *Method Vivre*. The Method Vivre is centered around a symbolic mentality and consists of a dynamic process of transplanting a life situation into a catechetical climate. Mesny argued that through bonds of friendship and deep personal relationships, catechists in a community setting are enabled to lead others under the action of the Spirit to discover for themselves in the presence of God in the original life situation as it unfolds symbolically. The Method Vivre would be the foundation on which Fr. Jim would build the SPRED ministry.

I first learned about SPRED twelve years ago when I was going through a major life transition. During the summer of 2008, in the midst of the global financial crisis, I was laid off from my first full time job which I obtained after college and found myself moving back to the neighborhood where I grew up on the southside of Chicago uncertain of the path that lied ahead of me. During this period, I began to examine all the different aspects of my life including my spiritual life. As I was undergoing this personal experience, I discovered an emptiness and felt very distant

from God. In addition, I struggled to identify my own place within my ecclesial community. Although I regularly attended Mass at my local parish, I felt isolated from the ecclesial community in many ways and struggled to develop a real sense of belonging amongst the people. While I was one of a few young adults in the community, I think the main issue with which I struggled was the lack of a welcoming attitude among the congregants. Week after week, I would attend Mass without conversing with a single person in the congregation. It also seemed as though many in the congregation were not interested in developing a community since the congregants were dispersed throughout the church with plenty of distance between themselves. I struggled to see how I could grow spiritually in a community that did not seem to value the development of the church.

After reflecting on my past, I realized that I had felt spiritually fulfilled while I was ministering to others, especially the poor. I recalled the past ministries in which I was involved. During my senior year of high school, I tutored women who were victims of violence and homelessness in their general education studies. In college I continued ministering to the poor by tutoring the children of Vietnamese immigrants. Not only did I find these experiences to be spiritually rewarding, they also opened my eyes to the plights of the poor and vulnerable in my own backyard. It was through working with the poor and vulnerable that I felt spiritually nourished and closest to God. Unfortunately, as my life became busy with work and school, I convinced myself that I no longer had time for ministry and pushed it aside. Upon this realization, I decided that while searching for a new job, I would also seek out opportunities to minister to the poor and vulnerable in society. It just so happened that I would find my calling to SPRED in my parish bulletin the following weekend.

I learned from the bulletin that my parish was trying to establish a SPRED ministry. I decided to pursue the ministry even though I had never previously worked with people with IDD nor had I any experience in the field of catechetics. I must admit, however, that I almost parted ways with SPRED after I attended an information session. Although it sounded

like a rewarding ministry, I was a bit skeptical of it, and I did not think there was a need for a SPRED ministry in my parish. My perspective on SPRED changed after observing a session at the Archdiocesan SPRED Center. As I sat behind the one-way mirror observing the session, I was in complete awe. All the assumptions and expectations I had going into the observation session were debunked. Prior to the observation, I assumed I would be observing a session that was chaotic, disorganized, and rambunctious. Instead, I was observing a peaceful and very structured session where everyone seemed happy to be participating. I sat and watched the catechist and friends quietly and peacefully work on their activity as they prepared to enter the celebration room where the catechesis would take place. They all worked peacefully for an hour before heading into the celebration room. In the celebration room, all the catechists and friends sat in a semicircle as the leader catechist led them through the SPRED session. After the catechesis, all the catechist and friends joined each other around the table to share fellowship and food with each other. While I was amazed by the environment, the structure of the session, and the tranquility of the session, I was particularly drawn to the sense of community and friendship. It was obvious that there was a strong bond between the catechists and friends, and most importantly, everyone accepted each member of the community for who they were. Everyone was happy to be part of the community and there was no doubt that God was present with the community that evening. During the observation, I witnessed firsthand what Pope Francis refers to as the “art of accompaniment.” I witnessed the desire of both catechists and friends to belong to a community and a desire to accompany each other on their faith journey. As I observed the session, I realized my own desire to be part of a similar community. I left the observation with a strong desire to become a part of SPRED even though I still had doubts that this ministry was needed at my parish.

I was hesitant to pursue SPRED at my parish because I personally did not know anyone in the parish with a disability; nor did I notice anyone at Mass who might benefit from this ministry. Regrettably, I found myself making the all-too-common argument that people with IDD did not

belong to my parish. It only took a few weeks for me to discover that my logic was totally flawed. Not only did I meet multiple families of people with IDD within my parish, I also discovered that there were group homes for people with IDD within my parish boundaries. One home was right across the street from the train station where I waited every day. I quickly learned that there were many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities living within my own backyard. I just failed to see them.

In September of 2009, my parish officially opened our SPRED center and I agreed to become the parish chairperson. Our group welcomed 6 adults with IDD, most of whom still remain part of the group. While there were some challenging moments initially, it only took a couple of months for me to realize that SPRED was indeed the ministry to which I was being called. Every week I would be warmly greeted by all our catechists and friends. Upon arrival to our SPRED, all of our friends had big smiles on their faces upon entering the room and warmly greeted everyone in the room. They were happy to be there, and I was also happy to be there. I truly felt as though I belonged in the group.

During our sessions we work together, pray together, laugh together, and enjoy our time being together. Within our small community we have people of all types of abilities, and despite our differences every member is a valued member of the community. There is no doubt that strong friendships have been formed over the years that I have been a part of SPRED, and I can honestly say that these friendships are some of the strongest friendship bonds I have experienced in my life. Being part of SPRED has given me new insights into the meaning of friendship and how I can grow in my own relationship with God through the friendships of others. This strong bond of friendship is evident among all the members of the group. One parent mentioned that the only activity her son participates in outside his daily workshop is SPRED. She mentioned that he outright refuses to participate in any other activity but looks forward to coming to SPRED. Another parent mentioned that his two daughters rarely leave the house after dinner. In fact, they usually start preparing for bed in the late afternoon. However, on SPRED nights

they willingly change their routine and wait for the session with joyful anticipation. There is something about the bond of friendship developed in SPRED that brings all the members of the group great joy. Being part of this welcoming and joyful small community of faith has renewed my spiritual life and has led to my own spiritual transformation. When I began in SPRED, I thought I would only be helping our friends grow in their relationship with God. Little did I know that our friends would help me grow in my own relationship with God, and would also help me to better understand the feeling of belonging especially to a community.

Like many other ministries, SPRED was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most SPRED groups, including my own SPRED had to cease all in-person sessions. This was the first time since the founding of SPRED sixty years ago that physical gatherings had to be suspended for such a long period of time. Many volunteers, including myself, struggled to identify ways in which we could continue our ministry to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Many groups had to come up with creative ways to stay connected with their friends with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The first idea that sprang to my mind was to take the ministry to a virtual platform. I thought I would follow the lead of many other ministries and simply take the ministry online. At first, I thought this would be a fairly straight forward task since it seemed that most of the world seamlessly transitioned to an online platform. Businesses, schools, liturgical celebrations, gatherings with friends and families were now being conducted virtually; so I figured that we could easily transition the SPRED ministry to an online format. Although some of the people with intellectual and developmental disabilities were able to successfully access the online platforms, I quickly became aware of the obstacles people with intellectual and developmental disabilities encountered in this online world. Several of the people with intellectual and developmental disabilities simply did not have access to the technical equipment required to conduct a virtual session, while others were prevented from participating because of their disability. Over the last few months, I learned that many of the people living in group homes do not have access to computers, smart phones, or the internet. In

addition, a few of the people with intellectual disabilities in my SPRED group are non-verbal or have another disability which prevent them from being fully engaged in a virtual session. I soon realized that I would need to take a new approach to SPRED during this pandemic. I also came to the realization that I needed to come up with a unique approach for individual friends because their abilities and living arrangements differed.

As I brainstormed ideas for how to continue the ministry, it soon became evident that some aspects of the SPRED ministry simply needed to be put on hold until the pandemic subsides. While some aspects of the ministry were halted, I made it my priority to nurture and maintain the relationships that were developed through SPRED over the last decade. Many of our friends with intellectual and developmental disabilities have had their lives turned upside down by this pandemic. In order to keep all the residents safe, group homes have gone into lockdown. The residents have been unable to leave the homes and visitors are not allowed. Our friends with disabilities living with their families are under similar lockdowns. Many have been unable to interact with people outside their family bubble. All workshops and activities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have been temporarily canceled because this pandemic. Many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have been living in isolation and some do not fully understand why they cannot leave the house or see their families or friends. My goal is to instill in our friends with disabilities a sense of connectedness and belonging during this pandemic with the hope of preventing them from feeling abandoned or neglected.

Some of our friends with disabilities living at home with their parents have been able to participate in a few virtual gatherings during the pandemic. During the pandemic we have gathered online every 4-6 weeks to check-in with the friends with disabilities who have the ability to join us virtually. Each meeting had a different theme. For example, over the summer we met for an ice cream social. All the catechists and friends gathered virtually to eat ice cream together and talk about the rather odd summer. We all spoke about our favorite ice cream flavors and

sang different songs. We mostly just enjoyed the time together. While some of our friends managed to remain at the gathering for 45 minutes, a couple of our friends lost interest after a few minutes. Even though they were only able to manage for a few minutes, it was evident to me that they were happy to see the other members of the group and hear their voices. Many of our friends struggled with the distractions in their home; some found it difficult to focus on the screen, and others seemed to suffer from “Zoom fatigue”. During one of our gatherings, one of our friends with disabilities appeared to have no interest in joining our Zoom gathering until she saw a glimpse of some members of the group. At the beginning of our gathering, she kept pushing away the tablet when her mom was encouraging her to offer a greeting to the group. While her mom was speaking to the group, she caught a glimpse of some of the members of the group on the screen and was filled with delight. She quickly grabbed hold of the tablet and began to wave to everyone. For the next ten minutes she stared at the tablet with a smile on her face. It was evident to me that she felt a special connection to the group and a sense of belonging in our virtual gathering.

One friend who lives in a group home was unable to join our virtual gathering because he does not have access to the technology. He is also unable to speak on the phone because of his speech limitations. I helped to nourish his relationship with the group by sending him cards in the mail with photos of the group. The staff at his home informed me that he keeps the photos in his room, and he looks at them several times throughout the day. In addition to the photos, some volunteers and I have stopped by the home and waved at him and his housemates through the window. Every time we conducted these window visits, he always enthusiastically waved at us through the window with a big smile on his face.

In the late summer, as it became evident that we may need to cancel most if not all of our in-person sessions for the upcoming year, I became concerned that the extended time apart might destroy the close-knit community that we had built up over the last ten years. I was also concerned that this extended time apart might also hinder our ability to grow in

our relationship with God. I was particularly worried about our friends with IDD most of whom are unable to understand the need to cancel our sessions and the need to remain physically distant. I was concerned that they might feel as though the SPRED community abandoned them or forgot about them. Personally, it was difficult to be apart from the community that played such a critical role in my own spiritual renewal. I also worried about the challenges to my own faith life and was especially worried about the potential of a staleness developing in my faith life without the accompaniment of my small community of faith. While the last few months have been challenging both emotionally and spiritually, there have been moments that have affirmed that the bonds of friendship within our small community of faith remain strong, and that God remains present to us. During the moment when I get to see our friends react to seeing the group on Zoom or outside the window of their home, I am reminded that God is indeed with us. When I see the smile on their face and hear the excitement in their voices, I know that our bonds of friendship remain strong, and it is through those bonds of friendships that we can grow in our relationship with God.

While the pandemic has been a challenging period for most people around the world, this period has been especially challenging to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Many of the programs and ministries that serve people with disabilities have been forced to cease their services and ministries during this period. Out of an abundance of caution for their safety and well-being, many people with disabilities have found themselves isolated from society and unable to connect with their families and friends. Despite the challenges, those involved in SPRED ministry have managed to find new and creative ways to maintain and nourish the relationships with our friends with intellectual and developmental disabilities. We are all looking forward to the day when we can physically gather again as a whole community.

Communicating the Good News to Thai Children amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

Camillo Pornsann Singchai¹
(Thailand)

Like Catholic churches all over the world, churches in Thailand have weekend catechism classes for children of various ages in order to prepare them to receive the sacraments of Baptism, First Communion, and Confirmation. Churches in Thailand often also have a special catechism program for students when they are on summer break. In Thailand, this usually takes place from March to May, which are the hottest months of the year. These classes are conducted in meeting rooms of the church or in classrooms of Catholic schools connected with the parish.

Nevertheless, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand, especially in the first half of 2020, forced these catechism programs and the familiar methods of teaching to be completely changed as churches were required to shutter their doors. This was part of the government's effort to "flatten the curve", preventing greater spread of the pandemic in the country, as was seen in many other countries around the world. These orders came during the latter part of March when Thailand experienced a marked increase in COVID-19 cases of infection in the community.

Despite these great challenges, the effort to proclaim the Gospel through religious education for children of various levels had to continue so

¹ Camillo Pornsann Singchai is a seminarian of the Archdiocese of Bangkok, Thailand. Presently, he is in the second year of theology at Lux Mundi National Major Seminary (Saengtham College). He received a Bachelor and Master of Law from Chulalongkorn University.

that the youth would have the opportunity to receive the sacraments. As a country with a small Catholic population, about 300,000 out of nearly 70 million population, religious education for the youth is vital to the future of the local Church. Indeed, ongoing catechism training for the youth in order to help them develop their Christian identity and maintain steadfastness in their baptismal calling is needed to respond to the concerns which Pope Francis has stated in *Christus Vivit*, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation written in response to the Fifteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops held from 3 to 28 October 2018. The apostolic exhortation addresses particularly the faith and vocation of young people in the modern era. In the document, Pope Francis states:

Youth ministry, as traditionally carried out, has been significantly affected by social and cultural changes. Young people frequently fail to find in our usual programmes a response to their concerns, their needs, their problems and issues. The proliferation and growth of groups and movements predominantly associated with the young can be considered the work of the Holy Spirit who constantly shows us new paths. Even so, there is a need to look at the ways such groups participate in the Church's overall pastoral care, as well as a need for greater communion among them and a better coordination of their activities. (CV, no. 202)

Not only does the Holy Father emphasize the importance of the youth for the Church in the modern era, he also calls attention to the need for “new styles and new strategies” in youth ministry, which “needs to become more flexible: inviting young people to events or occasions that provide an opportunity not only for learning, but also for conversing, celebrating, singing, listening to real stories and experiencing a shared encounter with the living God.” (CV, no. 204)

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed greatly to the social, economic, and political disruptions that have affected all parts of human society, including the youth. In Thailand, the pandemic was most intense in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region, forcing Catholic churches to stop

holding public Masses and canceling summer catechism camps for the youth, among other things. This was understandable because these gatherings could potentially cause the virus to spread even more widely within the population. Nonetheless, a number of churches in the Bangkok Archdiocese tried to find ways in order to continue teaching catechism to the youth so that they would not be able to lose the opportunity to receive the sacraments of First Reconciliation and First Communion, which many had been preparing for. The challenge was how to carry out the teaching in a safe and effective way, especially when the children were not able to gather at the church.

As a seminarian in the Archdiocese of Bangkok, I as well as other seminarians, are assigned pastoral work at various parishes as part of our formation program. One of our ministries is teaching catechism to the youth during the summer break. In order to carry out our work, we decided to research the various possible methods, and were able to come up with three strategies, all with their own advantages and disadvantages. The methods are as follow:

- (1) **Teaching in person at the church.** With this method, the children must come to the church in order to participate in the class. However, each person must wear a face mask or face covering throughout the class. Everyone must regularly clean their hands with hand sanitizer prepared for them by the church, and observe strict physical distancing. In addition, the time for instruction would be reduced to half a day, or not more than 2 hours. The advantages of this method are: that both the teacher and student can more effectively communicate with one another; questions could be answered directly. Moreover, student-teacher relationship is more easily enhanced in this environment, similar to the usual method of teaching before the pandemic hit. Nonetheless, the disadvantage for this method included the fact that a number of parents understandably did not want to send their children to the church for in-person catechism for fear that such gathering would increase the risk of infection – not just in

the classroom, but also on the way to and from the church, and the vicinity around the church. Moreover, this method could be seen as in violation of regulations enforced by the Ministry of Public Health in order to prevent the escalation of the pandemic.

(2) **Teaching via social media with one-way communication.** This method would employ either pre-recorded videos or live streaming sessions published on the various social media platforms including the teacher's personal Facebook account, Catholic Facebook Fan pages, Facebook Public Groups and YouTube Channels. The content would include catechism lessons, Bible Study lessons, and Bible reflections presented by priests, sisters, seminarians and lay catechists. This content would be open for all to view. At the same time, a private Facebook group would be set up specifically for those who are directly involved in the catechism program either as teacher or student in order to view the uploaded content. The benefit of this method is the decreased risk of coronavirus infection since the student does not have to leave the house, in accordance with guidance from the Public Health Ministry. In addition, children have the opportunity to practice using communication technology in a positive manner; they also save time and money in not having to come to the church. The negative effects of this method are: the teacher and student cannot have direct communication with one another, answers to question cannot be given in a quick manner, and teacher-student relationship also suffers from the lack of direct interaction. This is in addition to the difficulties regarding the ability of the student to use technology, the availability of digital equipment at home, and the speed of the internet. Other negative aspects of this method are difficulty in evaluating the student's work, and honesty in answering test questions provided by the teacher.

(3) **Teaching via social media with two-way communication.** This method would involve video conferencing technology and

applications such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, or video call using applications such as LINE and Messenger. The positive points in this method are: both student and teacher can see and hear each other better depending on the speed of the internet of both parties, questions posed by either side can be answered in real-time. Student-teacher interaction and relationship can also be achieved at some level, although certainly not in the same manner that can be realized when all are physically located in the same classroom. Other positive and negative points connected with this method are similar to those presented in the one-way communication model.

As a seminarian in the Bangkok Archdiocese, I was given the responsibility of assisting in the summer catechism program at St. Raphael Catholic Church, Pak Nam, Samut Prakan Province. The parish pastor had asked two minor seminarians to join with me as the leadership team for the program. After discussing and consulting with one another, we decided that we would choose the second method, which was one-way communication. This was the first time that I had the opportunity to learn about and experience live streaming using the program OBS Studio, which can create a beautiful background, share photos from the computer screen, as well as insert sounds and images in the middle of live streaming in a convenient and quick manner. These technological features helped to make the presentation more effective and interesting for the learner. The presentation was live streamed onto a Private Facebook Group, which we named “Bridge of Love Online Camp”. This group would be reserved exclusively for those who applied to join and were part of the summer catechism program itself.

Despite the one-way communication, we were able to deal with questions in real-time by having those who wished to raise a question to do so in the comment box below the video. Of course, some delay was inevitable due to issues with internet speed at times; however, on the whole, this method allowed for the teaching and learning to have a greater degree of liveliness and fun. In addition, we also provided the students with online quizzes to help evaluate the effectiveness of the learning. As part of the

catechism program, we also organized other activities online such as praying the Rosary, Mother of Perpetual Help Novena, the Divine Mercy, and the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday.

In my opinion, although not everyone has equal access to the internet, teaching catechism online in the manner described above can help promote a new and healthy way for children to use cyberspace to meet and connect with one another easily. This method also has the potential to lead the youth towards Christ and Church more closely. What is most important is that the Church must do its best to communicate the Good News to the youth using every means at its disposal. As Pope Francis writes:

... we should take into greater consideration those practices that have shown their value – the methods, language and aims that have proved truly effective in bringing young people to Christ and the Church. It does not matter where they are coming from or what labels they have received, whether “conservative” or “liberal”, “traditional” or “progressive”. What is important is that we make use of everything that has borne good fruit and effectively communicates the joy of the Gospel. (CV, no. 205)

The pandemic forced us to be creative in our way of dealing with the matter at hand. From the result of the evaluation of the catechism camp, most of the children felt very happy to join the program and were satisfied with what they received from it. Although they had never learned catechism in this manner, they were able to understand and accept this method of teaching and learning due to existing circumstances.

In conclusion, even though teaching catechism online can be compared to a drug that cannot cure every illness, and is probably not suitable for every faith community in Thailand, or in the world for that matter, due to social, cultural, and economic differences of each geographical context, it was indeed appropriate and effective for the circumstances of the pandemic that we found ourselves in at St. Raphael Catholic Church. It helped us to

continue our pastoral mission of proclaiming the Gospel of God's Love to young people who have been experiencing tremendous upheavals in their lives due to the global pandemic. Online catechism helped us to affirm to the young people in a timely manner that the Church is indeed a loving mother to them, especially in times of great anxiety, challenges and difficulties.

How to Teach in Time of Pandemic?

Leo-Martin Angelo R. Ocampo¹
(Philippines)

The COVID-19 lockdown caught us all by surprise. What was initially announced as a weeklong suspension of classes turned out to be a protracted community quarantine that hasn't even ended as of the time of writing. Campuses were closed and activities were cancelled. Students and teachers, especially those from far provinces, hurried to get home. Suddenly, we found ourselves thrust into online teaching and learning, regardless of what level of prior experience or actual readiness each one had.

The Internet, slow as it already was in this part of the world, became even more problematic as many industries had to shift to online. Besides, although online learning systems have been in place for some years now, they were not always being used. Many teachers and students still knew

¹ Leo-Martin Angelo R. Ocampo completed his Master of Arts degree, Major in Theological Studies in Loyola School of Theology, Ateneo de Manila University, in 2015. He graduated from the same university in 2007 with a Bachelor of Arts degree, Major in Philosophy, while undergoing formation in San José Major Seminary. At present, he is a Faculty Member of the Institute of Religion, Academic Collaborations Officer of the Ecclesiastical Faculties, and Research Associate at the Center for Theology, Religious Studies and Ethics at the Pontifical and Royal University of Santo Tomás in Manila where he is finishing his doctoral studies, majoring in Theology. He is associate editor of the journal *Loyola Papers* of Loyola School of Theology and hosts a program on the writings of Pope Francis “Tinta ng Santa Papa” in Radio Maria Philippines every first and third Wednesday 8:05-9:00PM. He is a lay Dominican of the Sanctus Dominicus Lay Dominican Fraternity.

little about how to actually navigate and utilize them. Thus, there were questions left and right, as well as refresher seminars hurriedly organized as the teacher-participants themselves struggled with their internet connections and learning how to use web conferencing apps. This would turn out providential, though, as teachers would get a firsthand taste of how it felt to study online, having to sit through a three-hour training, with an attention span as fluctuating as the intermittent connectivity.

Aside from my usual teaching role, I was unexpectedly assigned to become an “eLearning Specialist” for the Ecclesiastical Faculties, where I had been serving as a lay administrator. Not that I was a real eLearning expert, but simply because among our professors who were mostly priests and burdened with more important responsibilities than myself, I was the one who happened to be available and somehow able at the same time. The task turned out to be much more complicated and demanding than I expected. Initially, I was only told to conduct basic trainings and to be available in case one of the professors needed to consult about the learning management system. Soon after, I also had to ensure that everyone – both teachers and students – had their online accounts and that these were working properly. Some of the more senior faculty members, although seasoned in their craft, also needed more technical assistance than others. If anything went wrong, I always had to be ready to attend to pressing concerns, regardless if it came on a weekend or smack in the middle of the night. Almost everything felt very urgent. Any delay could mean that a student or even a whole class would miss a precious chance to learn. Patience was also paramount, especially when the people you were dealing with seemed to be running out of patience just as you are. One realizes that being a teacher does not always involve being in the podium or the pedestal. As with all Christian leaders, the call is always to be at the service of all.

My side role as a social media manager for our academic unit also became very important. In the absence of physical interaction, our social media pages became our virtual “space” for continued communication and contact. It was also an opportunity to foster a sense of community

and connection, even if only by keeping people updated and responding promptly and warmly to their queries and concerns. One realizes how crucial this role has become today of being bridge builders, especially online, where people can be more present but not necessarily closer.

Meanwhile, I had to learn to adjust to this new mode of teaching myself. Course plans had to be recalibrated and teachers needed to imagine new ways of delivering standard content. Most definitely, a three-hour continuous lecture – difficult as it is to pull off in the flesh – was out of the question in a virtual context where eyestrain and the so-called “Zoom fatigue” are stark realities. The shift to online learning called for change not only in mode but also in mindset. We had to come up with activities that would be effective, exciting and doable at the same time, given all the constraints. Creativity was the only viable option. At the same time, interior dispositions like openness, humility, and tenacity also proved very important. To borrow the beautiful image proposed by the Lord in the parable, we need new wineskins for new wine. There is always room for growth and updating.

Nonetheless, there were many pleasant surprises that came along the way. At first, learning to deal with various tools for online teaching and learning can be very daunting but I began to enjoy them soon enough. The initial discomfort gave way to a feeling of empowerment as I broke new ground. I learned how to trust in my students more, even when I could not see them and miss the feeling of being in charge and in control. Most of all, I could not help but be profoundly amazed by the creativity and enthusiasm of my students who are thankfully much more proficient than I am in the use of technology. Creativity, after all, is not one-sided. We draw from the creativity that the Spirit inspires in each of us, for as long as we are generous and willing enough to learn.

Aside from delivering content, there was also the challenge of engaging the students, encouraging them to participate in the discussion and interact with one another, as well as making them feel our concern and care especially in these tough times. Beyond the pressure to do what

was required, I had to constantly remind myself that my students were not just brains to be informed but persons to be formed. For this I needed not only to be flexible but to be truly compassionate, understanding and accommodating the needs and situation of each one. Not all had stable Internet connection. Not all were comfortable being seen on a camera. Not all were able to keep up with the pace and method of online learning, especially in these difficult times. At the same time, no one should be neglected. No one should be abandoned. No one should be left behind. Besides creativity and competence, what a teacher really needs especially in moments like these is compassion.

I realized this very vividly on the first day of class during the first term. We were having a synchronous session when a rather strong earthquake shook several areas in the southern part of the country. As eager and dedicated to learn as they were, my students who were residing in those areas quickly went back to our virtual classroom as soon as they could. Clearly, one cannot continue as if nothing happened. Yet how can one continue given what just happened? This is even more the case now after a series of typhoons brought untold devastation to many parts of the country. I was deeply humbled when two of my students from the affected areas, which had no electricity at that time, made effort to be able to send me an email, apologizing that they could not submit their paper on the due date. This is how committed they are to their education, so how can I not teach? But at the same time, how can I teach? My mind and my heart are very small but my classroom has now become so wide and so complex. May the Lord give me a mind and heart as big as my virtual classroom so I can embrace all of my students in love.

As a lay pastoral leader in the field of education, the pandemic taught me that being a shepherd does not have to mean being always in control. Sometimes the situation itself takes you by surprise and, although you are not blind, you find yourself at a loss and grappling in the dark. The shepherd has become one of the lost sheep. Nonetheless, we are never really alone. In reality, our flock itself also shepherds us, giving our life meaning, purpose and direction. We also have our fellow shepherds to

be with us in our struggles and most of all the Chief Shepherd who never lets us down. Suddenly, it is not so bad being a lost sheep anymore when you realize that you have such a loving shepherd.

At present, everything still feels very uncertain. New challenges come up just as we are beginning to adjust and be comfortable. I would like to conclude with this simple prayer, based on Psalm 23, that I shared with my fellow-teachers in one of our online learning seminars:

The Lord is my Teacher,
I shall not want.
He leads me to vibrant classes,
he refreshes my passion.
Even though I walk in the valley of online teaching
I fear no evil for you are with me.
Through my companions and students,
you motivate and guide me.
You prepare exciting innovations and challenges before me
in the sight of my doubt and complacency.
You anoint my head with inspiration,
my energy and creativity overflow.
Surely wisdom, knowledge and grace
shall follow me all the days of my teaching.
And I shall teach in the school of the Lord
for as long as He wills.

Religious Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Family Affair

Minh Anh Dinh, SVD¹
(USA)

The Local Situation

As of this writing, due to a rapid increase in COVID-19 cases in Chicago, the city is undergoing a new stay-at-home advisory. Different from the previous lockdown, people seemed to receive the new restriction with more acceptance. Nonetheless, this news still disheartens many of us while the holiday season already arrived; the time that is much defined by family gatherings with our beloved ones. Following the protocols, the local church official is carefully planning for safe Advent and Christmas celebrations that surely will look very different this year. Despite the situation seeming to remain stagnant, the local church is experiencing many positive and creative changes in pastoral services to the people. Speaking from my own experience, the most significant evidence is the transformation of the catechesis program for children in our Holy Child of Jesus Parish (Chicago, IL, USA) this year.

¹ Minh Anh Dinh, SVD is a member of the Society of the Divine Word – Chicago Province. He professed his solemn vows in September 2020 and was ordained deacon in October. He will be ordained to the priesthood in May 2021. He is currently finishing up his last year of theology at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. He has been a catechist for four years at the Holy Child Jesus Parish, located on the northside of Chicago. However, this year, due to the complication of the pandemic, he continues his ministry of teaching catechism online.

The Challenges

Back in March 2020, with a frightening and unpredictable spread of COVID-19, the archdiocese of Chicago decided to suspend all religious education programs. Baptism, First Communion, and Confirmation were asked to be postponed until the unforeseeable future. To deal with an uncertain situation like this, in order to keep our children safe, we had to stop all our classes and wait for further instructions from the archdiocese. Many children who were supposed to be baptized, receive first communion, and be confirmed this year had to be put on hold until the situation permitted. Few months after the virus had hit the United States, the situation worsened each day. The archdiocese decided to suspend all religious programs until the next academic year, while the churches were allowed to open only for private prayer. During the summer, the archdiocese and parishes worked collaboratively to find new and creative ways to create a safe environment for our children when they come back to classes. Religious education was planned to resume as soon as possible so that our children could go back to classes, which is very crucial to their faith. The archdiocese offered all parishes two scenarios. First, students could come back to regular classrooms in person with strict observance of guidelines and protocol from the archdiocese and local health officials, or with the second scenario, all classrooms must be taught virtually. At my parish, our pastor and the parish council decided to have our catechism classes to be taught online fully for the safety of both teachers and children.

The Experience

To prepare for online classes, it was a very challenging task. Our parish decided to utilize Zoom format for online teaching. We organized a session at the parish to instruct teachers on how to use Zoom because many of us had never had any experience of using online format for teaching before. However, some were still uncomfortable with online teaching and decided to opt out this year. The harder part, we thought, was to explain to parents how to use Zoom, so then they could show their

children. Fortunately, online format was not a problem for our students since they were more familiar with digital technology than their parents and already had experience with online learning at schools.

The new approach that we applied to our online catechesis is called *family catechesis*. The program was originally introduced by the Loyola Press with a hope to encourage parents' accompaniment with their children in teaching catechism at home. The online classes meet on a weekly-basis. With modification, many sessions require both parents and children to be present and to review materials together. After the sessions, parents can continue to help their children to understand better materials and finish their homework. Parents can contact catechists at the agreed time whenever they need help with the materials. This approach requires intensive collaboration between parents and catechists and allows catechists to interact cordially with both parents and children.

After two months of experiencing online learning, things flow better when we are more familiar with the program. There are many advantages of online learning, but disadvantages are also inevitable. In the beginning, the children were very excited for getting back to catechism class after a long break. With online format, even though it requires more time to prepare for the weekly session, it allows teachers to connect and share many aiding resources from the internet with our students. We are able to find videos, music, and online Bible stories to show to the children. These creative sources are a big help to catch the students' attention. As teachers, we understand that it is much more difficult for students to stay focused on online platform than in a regular class in person. It is nearly impossible for the teachers to know what is on the screens of the children during the lesson. I often check our students' attention by asking them to read or answer questions. This is one of the main reasons why we need the parents' accompaniment in the program, in order to assist the teachers to keep the children's attention during class.

Although the students do not give feedback directly to us about the online learning, we can sense disappointment in them whenever we have to skip

some activities that require in-person participation. This is the time when teachers need to be creative and find substitute exercises for them. Yet, from the parents' feedback, we receive many positive reactions, for this is the first time that they are allowed to stay in class and learn together with their children. By being with us, besides their valuable presence, the parents can also suggest many creative and valuable ideas to the class. This is truly a gift to have the parents in the classroom with the catechists. For example, parents suggested to help us to facilitate those activities and games that require in-person participation at home. They also invite other members in the family, like grandparents, siblings and relatives who live in the same house to participate with them. This not only makes the at-home-lessons more enjoyable and livelier for our children, but also creates strong bonds among the family members.

Benefits

Parents, the primary educators

I have taught catechesis for five years now, and my colleagues would agree with me that this is the first time that we are able to include parents this much in the faith formation of their children. For me, this is truly the wondrous grace of God amidst the pandemic. In many ways, the parents are invited to actively take on a prophetic role as a witness to their children's faith. This is actually nothing new, but already mentioned in the Vatican II document on Christian education *Gravissimum Educationis*. The Holy Father calls parents "the primary and principal educators" of the faith of their children. Oftentimes, for those who are in the field of children religious education, we realize that one of the greatest challenges is to engage parents in the faith formation of their children. Parents trust and rely on the church for their children's faith formation and also the sacraments of initiation. However, they easily forget that "the church" needs to be understood in the broader and more inclusive sense, which means parents are also part of the program and sharing the responsibility in the journey of faith of their beloved children. Our *family catechesis* approach allows us to collaborate more with parents, and moreover, to emphasize their original role as educators.

Family catechesis, faith begins at home

We are experiencing the greatest gap between home and church than ever. Religion and faith have less space in our homes and are often mistreated as a school subject, which can be only learned and discussed at school or in parish settings. This can be one of the reasons that makes parents feel less adequate to teach religion or talk about faith to their children at home. Pope Paul VI reminds parents in *Gravissimum Educationis* that they are “the ones who must create a family atmosphere animated by love and respect for God and man, in which the well-rounded personal and social education of children is fostered.” This teaching is fulfilled through our *family catechesis* approach by introducing religious education into home environment. In my sessions, it is absolutely beautiful to see when parents and grandparents help their children to open and read Bible together, to pray together, and to share their faith with one another at their own home. I believe this is a prophetic act of evangelization of both catechists and parents, when we are invited to be witness to the growth of our children’s faith in the Word of God. With this experience, we, catechists, parents and our children are reminded that faith development is not an individualistic endeavor but a very communal act.

COVID-19 and our children

One of the most essential objectives for catechism is to help our children to understand that faith is not limited to the teachings of the Church but also involves real life experiences and relationships with people around them. Although the materials that we are using do not have any content that relates to the current pandemic, we find it extremely important for our children to connect what they learn in class with the reality of the pandemic, especially when it comes to the topic on Catholic social teaching. There are three ways that I often use to incorporate the reality of the pandemic into the content to help the children to have a better understanding of the situation. First, it is to do frequent check-ins with our children about their feelings by asking how they are doing at school, what they are thinking of the situation, and allowing them to share with the class their challenges or

hope for the current situation. We were deeply touched, when one of our students shared with us that she was very sad because she could not be with her cousin to celebrate his birthday, who is very close to her. To respond to this, for our closing prayer, we prayed together for her cousin and his family. I believe this little thing means a lot to our children during this time when the situation creates so much emotion and anxiety for them, and our children need a place where they are able to share and be understood.

The second way that I do is to remind our children to keep up with the routines that help them stay safe and healthy. One of the most important routines that I often remind my students is to smile more. This is very simple for them to remember and still the most effective way to keep our children happy and positive during this time. And the third method is to allow them to accompany those who are impacted by COVID-19 in their prayers, for instance, to pray for the Church and government leaders, the victims, and those who are on the frontline of the COVID-19 fight. This allows them to gain awareness of those who are in need of their help and can be reached out by their power of prayer.

These three simple methods, in many ways, help to strengthen the mutual relationships between the catechists, parents and the children. Our children are encouraged to share their honest feelings with those who they can trust and are responsible for their growth and well-being. At the same time, catechists and parents can know and understand our children better, so that we provide them timely and necessary support or intervention to keep our children physically, mentally and spiritually healthy. By providing a safe, nourishing and healthy environment for our children, they can grow fully in their faith and become more generous in their services to others. This insight reflects well on the example of the Holy Family, which I would like to invite you to explore in the following part of this essay.

Reflection on the Holy Family

Having this article written during Advent season, I would like to reflect also on some virtues that we can learn from the members of the Holy Family.

Hopefully, my reflection could offer encouragement to catechists and parents, who may find great challenges in teaching faith to our children in the context of the current pandemic.

Joseph - Love

It is very opportune to write this reflection on St. Joseph a few days after Pope Francis announced the year of the saint. When we think of St. Joseph, we often have his image as the protector of the Holy Family. Indeed, his care and protection are compelled by his love for Mary and Jesus, and ultimately for God. Quoting from Pope Paul VI, Pope Francis reminds us in *Patris Corde* that Joseph's life was "a sacrificial service to the mystery of the incarnation and its redemptive purpose" by turning "his human vocation to domestic love into a superhuman oblation of himself, his heart and all his abilities, a love placed at the service of the Messiah who was growing to maturity in his home." Imitating Joseph, it is our duty and grace to share this human vocation to cultivate this "domestic love" in our homes for our children. This dreadful pandemic might force us to close the doors of our churches, but it can never shut the doors of our hearts, where love can be shared and received. Let love be the center of faith formation of our children, so that our children can experience and encounter the immense and boundless love of God that begins right at their home.

Mary – Joy

For Mary, I would like to invite us to reflect on the moments of joy while she was bearing Jesus in her womb, when she gave birth to Jesus, and watched her Son grow up. The joy of Mary requires much patience and trust in God. During this time of the pandemic, many things might not go as we plan, but it cannot stop us from experiencing joy in our lives. The greatest moments of joy that I often experience from my catechism class are when I listen to my students and their parents sing together, work together and pray together. I believe, like Mary, it is also a great joy for parents to accompany and witness our children grow in their faith. And

indeed, it is a great joy for many children, perhaps for the first time, to have this much time to learn and share their faith with their parents.

Jesus – *Hope*

As a Divine Word Missionary, I am benefited and nourished in many different ways by using this new approach of teaching catechesis. It allows me to live more fully my vocation as an SVD and a newly ordained deacon by finding ways to proclaim the Gospels to parents and children. For one example, in every session, besides learning lessons from the book, I invite parents and children to listen and reflect on Sunday Gospel readings. This is very important and meaningful to the families, especially during the pandemic while attending Sunday Mass is still being restricted. In addition, this creates a good habit for our children to read the Bible. I would strongly recommend this method to every minister and parent, to integrate more Bible readings into faith formation. Speaking from my own experience, it is very touching to see parents and children open the Bible and read out loud the Word of God at home. This is the greatest gift that God desires to give to our children, the incarnate Word - the Word that becomes flesh and longs for being present in our homes. By encouraging our children to read the Bible, we are planting seeds of hope and love in our children's hearts, the hearts that are found to be too vulnerable from the uncertainty and consequences of the pandemic. It is a way that we, as believers, can assure our children that Jesus is the living Word and the source of Hope of their lives. Indeed, hope is what we and our children desperately need to stay strong at this time from any hardship that the pandemic has brought to us. The hope that is freely given to us by the love of God, and as St. Paul affirms to us that this hope never disappoints us (Rm 5:5).

Conclusion

It is truly a great honor for me to have this opportunity to share my positive pastoral experience in the midst of the pandemic with many readers, who are leaders, ministers, religious, and parents, from many

parts of the world. This is the time that we and our children will never forget. I believe what will imprint forever in our children's hearts are memories of the moments when their parents are present in their journey of faith. Our lives will never be the same. We will have to constantly learn to live our faith and to teach our children in a new and creative way in this new normal way of living. As religious minister, I fervently ask parents to walk closely with your children in their faith formation, especially while we, catechists, can only meet our students virtually and with a very limited time. Together as family and members of the Church, I believe, with collaboration, in whatever circumstances, we can help our children to find abundant hope, joy and love of God present in their lives.

Arching Over: The Experience of the Rainbow in the Midst of the Pandemic

James Phillip M. Monserate, OHF¹
(Philippines)

The emergent and total shifting from physical, face-to-face to online and virtual setting excused no one. The fluid situation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic made everyone move from the common and usual experience to something unfamiliar. Masses were held online, classes were conducted virtually, groceries, social gatherings, medical check-ups, and even court trials were all held online – people just meeting and connecting virtually. We stayed at home, afraid of acquiring the virus, our mobility was controlled, making us “online people”, shut and trapped in the four places of our homes with our laptops and phones for good. This situation introduced a concept of change, altering the common way we look at “realities” before us.

But as I consider the risks and impact this situation brought to my state of life, to my community, to my students, and to the Church, what triggered and moved me more as a Christian educator, was the grace brought by

¹ James Phillip M. Monserate, OHF is an Assistant Professor of Theology and Philosophy at the Humanities and Social Sciences Department of Centro Escolar University, Manila. He finished his AB in Philosophy from Adamson University and his Master of Arts in Theology major in Social–Pastoral Communication from the University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines. At the moment, he is enrolled at the same university for his Canon Law studies. He also serves as the Animator of the Secular Oblates of the Holy Family—a Secular Institute for young men professionals and priest-affiliates under the Roman Catholic Bishop of Catarman.

this experience. Yes, Grace! Grace that I only recognized after putting my experience to that of the others, the ‘I’ to the ‘Thou’. Beauty that lies in something chaotic and confusing, like the beauty of a rainbow arching over after the pouring of the rain.

For the past three years to the present, I have been teaching theology subjects in one of the oldest universities in Manila – the Centro Escolar University. My students come from different fields, backgrounds, and life situations. Everything is fine, manageable, and enjoyable in the class during normal circumstances. Inter-personal relationships and communications are fostered, organization of ideas, dialogue, and collegiality among the students and the colleagues are easily shared and promoted.

But now comes the virtual and online setting of the class. Without the necessary preparation, I found myself unguarded; and this was much more so with my students, to the extent that some would even consider themselves helpless. My experience was undeniably challenging and exhausting, handling eight different subjects for five months. Giving modules, lecturing virtually, without me knowing if all of my students are awake or not, or if they are really taking notes or doing other things, or if they are really ‘present’ or just virtually complying since they are also troubled by their own concerns and afflictions. The set up was really an experience from the “scratch”, as if all were found crawling just to survive the situation, just to find a way to comply with what was necessary. And that was coupled with my usual idea of, *‘I am here, and therefore I have to finish the lecture required of me’*. It started from that idea; I brought that idea with me for I did not want to be bothered, and I found it just and necessary for students to learn the concepts of *‘I’ll teach – You comply’*, and *‘I am required to do this and, in your part, do that’*. I focused on the lesson, activities and discussion as required of me and of them.

However, in the midst of this unfamiliar experience of learning, relating, and teaching virtually, I found myself exhausted and patently tired, as

if things becomes less attractive, instead, mechanical, inanimate, and empty. The excitement in me, the enthusiasm, the joy, and the eagerness seemed to be on constant decline. The ‘rainbow’ that I wished to see seemed to be so dull.

Nonetheless, as I looked at my students sharing things about their experience at home, sharing their frustrations with some of their professors, and their struggle with their internet connectivity, as I listened to the students who were still eager to learn while spending fourteen days at the quarantine facilities, something prompted me to recall who I was in them. I was reminded of the ‘I’ and the ‘thou’ that led to the ‘we’ and the subject that I was handling which should rather give them hope and anticipation for it spoke of something metaphysical, divine and powerful. It spoke of God. There I realized that in this kind of situation, I was more than a teacher, a professor or a mentor to them... that I should be a ‘friend’, like the ‘person’ of Jesus who I was sharing about in my theology class. It also reminded me of what my Bishop told us during the start of this pandemic:

Jesus is present among us, in us, and with us... there is beauty and fullness in our experience of being locked down in our own homes. That we at home, were given the chance to love all the more and to be thankful for the presence of each other... We are not empty then, rather, the people and the Church were brought nearer to us. (Bishop Emmanuel C. Trance, D.D.)²

This newfound awareness changed my disposition! It changed my perspective! In fact, the rainbow I was waiting was afoot, and that my little effort, the little voice that I threw before my laptop before my online and virtual students shared little droplets that did not emit the coronavirus, but rather emitted and emanated little particles of hope and inspiration. And that made me question my way of relating with my students and in facing this extraordinary circumstance. What came from me? How

² Easter Message 2020. Most Rev. Emmanuel Trance, D.D., PhD. Bishop of Catarman and Canonical Founder, Secular Oblates of the Holy Family.

did I appear before them? Could they see the ‘Jesus’ I was trying to communicate in my lectures through me? These soul-searching questions helped me to realize that I found myself exhausted and uninterested, tired and unmotivated simply because I was just focused on myself, on what I wanted, on the requirement of lessons and discussions; my thoughts were fixated on the activities. I was so focused on these things that I considered everything, including my students and myself as “objects”.

Having gained these insights into my situation, I altered my way of relating and becoming. I made myself aware that things before me were not mere objects, our being just a “screen away” was not a mechanical event. Rather it was grace in disguise. These people, these students, were brought nearer to me; I was given a chance to highlight and be thankful for who they were and for their presence.

And so, one day, I found myself being a ‘friend’ to them. I found myself creating a rainbow with them, devoting time in asking about the experience of my students prior to going into the virtual discussions. I started appreciating their sharing. I learned to jibe with their games and interests, and from time to time I was able to pause from our usual activities, or to make use of their relevant experiences at home as answer to their class undertakings. There I learned to enter their chaos and circles, to value their presence, admiring how each one was considerate of one another, learning to compromise for the good of everyone, emitting particles of trust and hope thus creating the image of a rainbow, igniting once more my faith in my students, my job, my work and myself. That a rainbow can never be dull!

There, I learned how to be creative. There I learned how to be a “Church” at home open wide for others. That I was not in this virtual setting to manipulate or to guard; rather I was here to create rooms for connection, for a virtual community, with my students. In return, I was able to let my students appreciate “theology” – for they realized that it was not just limited to the sacraments, the grace, the liturgy, nor the transcendental or the ontological. Rather it was all about finding God even in the

virtual connection and relation, in the smile and joy of the others, in compromising, in the sharing, in the attitude of consideration, in the attitude of gratitude when students were able to say “Thank You”, in the students who knew how to appreciate others. It taught me well, to find God not in the objects but with the subject – which were the people, and in my case, my students.

Thus, despite of our broken experiences as a community, our tiring efforts, our shared fear and frustrations, we continue to love. We continue to stand and try other approaches because there are people who are worth the pain and compromises! There are people who are deserving of our love, our labors and determinations. We might not die of coronavirus, but once we stop loving and giving life to others, once we stop our creativity, once we stop compromising, trusting and seeing the capacity of others, we simply allow ourselves to fall victim to the idea that we are powerless and unequipped as members of the Church. In that sense, we might be worse than those dead individuals concealed in the tomb, lying in the empty ground.

Therefore, I am not empty; we are not empty; the Church and her pastoral works and creativities will never cease. We continue to adapt and compromise with our people; we journey with our people, even when it would require unconventional, creative, unfamiliar ways; and in my case, as I was put by God in this field, the academe, in teaching theology to my university students, I learned that, I was able to maximize ‘teaching theology’ not by being focused rigidly on the lessons, discussions and activities but on being focused on the person – the experience, the circle, and the chaos of my students. The arching over of the rainbow is possible after the chaos, when one emits the particles of trust, faith, hope and love, when one learns to compromise, to let go and to enter the circle and the chaos of the others. There will I start teaching God to my students today and those to come in the future. There will I truly show them what the Church and what Theology is all about.

Injecting Life into the Body of Christ: Reflections on Mission during a Pandemic

James McTavish, FMVD¹
(Philippines)

When I first heard of the coronavirus, like many perhaps I did not pay too much attention. I initially presumed that it would be similar to the seasonal flu or influenza virus. But with time, the grim reality became clear – we were dealing with a totally different beast. Now, well into the pandemic, we have all seen the damage and devastation caused by COVID-19, and no one (well only those stubborn or reckless) would deny its potency and danger. In this reflection I will not allude so much to the virus – as so much has already been said about it – but instead will try to focus on how the Holy Spirit squeezes out a creative pastoral response from the middle of a pandemic. And largely it is not so much a sharing about the overall mission of my community, which I have written about elsewhere, but my personal experience of mission during the pandemic. I pray it can read like my personal “Magnificat” to give thanks to God for

¹ James McTavish is a missionary priest of the Verbum Dei Catholic missionaries. Originally from Glasgow, Scotland he has spent 17 years as a missionary in the Philippines. He studied Medicine at Cambridge University, England and qualified as a Medical Doctor. He worked as a surgeon and specialized in Plastics and Reconstruction although he says his own beauty is natural. He then heard the call of the Lord to heal the Body of Christ through evangelization – “Give me life by your Word” (Psalm 119). He studied Moral Theology and Bioethics in Rome before teaching courses in Moral Theology and Bioethics, and publishing 60 articles and various books. He is active in retreat giving and biblical apostolate, as well as giving conferences on topics related to moral theology, bioethics and spirituality. He is currently learning the bagpipes, in line with Psalm 150: “Praise the Lord with pipes!”

all the good He continues to do through my life.

Evangelizing the Digital Continent

In summary, the mission went on line. If Christ asks us to “go to all nations” an obvious place for mission is the so-called digital continent. As Pope Francis noted, “The ends of the earth, dear young people, nowadays are quite relative and always easily ‘navigable’. The digital world – the social networks that are so pervasive and readily available – dissolves borders, eliminates distances and reduces differences” (World Mission Sunday message, 2018). To launch into the digital world is to “throw your nets on the right side” (see John 21:6). Thankfully in our *Verbum Dei* community, we had already been investing in an online national communications ministry for a few years. The various fields of this ministry included radio, Facebook, videos, written word (like web news articles) and the like. It meant that when the pandemic started, we hit the ground running. It did not take us totally by surprise.

Of course, first things first, it is slightly strange or unusual to celebrate a Mass online. After some initial hesitation and seeing the churches lockdown, it became clear that this would be the new modality for the foreseeable future. After some forays into the worlds of Zoom, Google meet and Facebook live, we felt more at home. Seeing the impending volume of online work, our community invested in a new microphone and webcam. Some obvious benefits or advantages of online work began to emerge especially no longer having to worry about the (usually terrible) Manila traffic. The numbers of participants in a weekly Sunday Gospel reflection called “School of the Word” started to rise. From the weekly presential meeting pre-pandemic (9 am-11 am each Wednesday in a parish) where we would regularly expect 20-25 participants, we shifted our “School of the Word” to a “Zoom of the Word.” The SOW became a ZOW. The numbers began to rise, from 20, to 25, to 35. We encouraged the participants of the ZOW to invite their friends and colleagues. We passed 50, then 60, and then 99. The Zoom was upgraded and we sailed up to 140 participants each week.

Happy Endings

We had two online recollections also recently in November and December. The November one was titled “Happy Endings” and was a reflection on living well, and preparing well for our death. The activity was three hours long with two main talks and a Mass, with moments of prayer and reflection included. Around 360 people signed up which shows how relevant a topic it was, and the interest of people to prepare well for a happy ending. “Choose now what you would wish to have chosen at life’s end” as St Anthony Mary Claret suggests. The more we reflect on the end, the more we can be motivated to live well today as St. Alphonsus di Liguori reminds us – “If you wish to live well, spend the remaining days of life with death before your eyes.” He continues, “If you believe that you must die, that there is an eternity, that you can die only once, and that if you then err your error will be forever, irreparable, why do you not resolve to begin at this moment, to do all in your power to secure a good death?”

Go to Joseph

An online Advent recollection was also given in early December, following the same flow, and around 300 signed up. The Advent recollection focused on the life and role of St. Joseph in the Christmas mystery. As part of the preparation I was inspired to write a song about St. Joseph encapsulating the mysteries of his life. The title is “Go to Joseph” coming from chapter 41 of the book Genesis:

The seven years of abundance in Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in all the other lands, but in the whole land of Egypt there was food. When all Egypt began to feel the famine, the people cried to Pharaoh for food. Then Pharaoh told all the Egyptians, “**Go to Joseph** and do what he tells you.” When the famine had spread over the whole country, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe throughout Egypt. (Genesis 41:53-56)

The song I wrote goes ...

Chorus:

*Go to Joseph, go to Joseph,
A just man and fair,
Go to Joseph and seek his help,
He will answer your prayer
The old Joseph was the keeper of the grain.
Saved from a well he rose to fame.
The new Joseph, with Mary as his wife,
Was the guardian of the bread of life
In the paintings you have a white flower.
A reminder for us that purity is power.
Holding in your hands a lily and an ax.
You can repel the strongest attacks
To distance from Mary, God's plan is not clear.
But the angel reassures – “do not fear.”
Even in slumber the Lord to him speaks.
The Lord shared him gifts even in his sleep.
Pick up the child and flee the evil Herod.
He wants the infant King Jesus dead.
Joseph promptly obeys and travels at night.
Joseph, may we also take care of the Light*

The personal fruit in me of the recollection was much gratitude to God for giving us St. Joseph. I was inspired by his consistency and constancy in responding to God. I saw the depth of his chasteness with Mary – in the midst of possible confusion, even hurt feelings over what happened with Mary (his spouse was pregnant despite Joseph not having lived with her) he did not act or react out of feelings. As Fr. Donald Calloway, MIC, succinctly puts it, “Our spiritual father teaches us that we should not act hastily or harshly when we encounter perplexing situations. We are to take everything to prayer, and wait on the Lord for guidance and light. If we are loving, faithful, reverent, and just, God will reveal everything to us and make us abundantly fruitful.”

The words of St. Stanislaus Papczyński were pretty insightful for me too: St Joseph “wanted to leave her secretly. But how prudently and righteously

he wanted to do it! He did not want to separate from her openly, lest she be defamed, but clandestinely, that she may preserve her good name. You ought to learn from this holy and just man: although the deeds of others may seem evil to you and are said to be imperfect, you should judge them secretly, not openly, and judge in such a way that neither your conscience nor their good name be hurt.”

Interestingly enough, 4 days after the recollection Pope Francis released *Patris Corde*, an apostolic letter about St. Joseph. In it the Holy Father writes,

The spiritual path that Joseph traces for us is not one that explains, but accepts. Only as a result of this acceptance, this reconciliation, can we begin to glimpse a broader history, a deeper meaning... We need to set aside all anger and disappointment, and to embrace the way things are, even when they do not turn out as we wish. Not with mere resignation but with hope and courage. In this way, we become open to a deeper meaning. Our lives can be miraculously reborn if we find the courage to live them in accordance with the Gospel. It does not matter if everything seems to have gone wrong or some things can no longer be fixed. God can make flowers spring up from stony ground. (*Patris Corde*, no. 4)

I was very grateful to read and pray with these words as they helped me to reconcile some challenges lived through the pandemic.

Formation Ministry

I was also able to continue formation ministry online. In previous years I had given presential formations to groups such Exodus (composed of religious novice men and women from various congregations and nationalities) and AAFP (the Association of Women Formators of the Philippines). Even with the pandemic the show went on. I gave a 5-morning formation on human sexuality entitled “Introduction to Human Sexuality & Consecrated Life” to around 75 young novices. Issues covered included sexuality and consecrated life, challenges in living chastity, and sexuality and the mission among others. I particularly enjoy the formation ministry

and understand it as a continuation of the teaching ministry of Christ who was often not only preaching, but teaching as the Gospels frequently report – “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues” (Matthew 9:35) and “He taught them many things” (Mark 4:2).

Various other topics in online formations which I had the opportunity to give included: “Conscience, Scruples and Discernment” and “Formations on How to Pray with the Word of God” to Verbum Dei novices, “Elements of Affectivity and Sexuality” for Teachers, “Dangers of Internet Pornography,” to our young people’s group in Sydney, Australia, “A Discussion on Sexuality” for our parish youth in Madrid, Spain, and “Gender theory and the mission of Catholic education” and “Same Sex Attractions and the mission of Catholic education” to Guidance counselors and Teachers. The latest formation I gave was on “Love, marriage and family in *Amoris Laetitia*” organized by the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Thank you, Lord, for the gift of formation ministry which keeps my brain active and help me fulfill the commandment “to love God with all your mind” (Luke 10:27).

Rooted in Prayer

I feel it also essential to mention the vital role of prayer during this pandemic. In many moments I have found myself in need, with various feelings in me to face, and external challenges to deal with. The general situation has been compounded by a quasi-lockdown in Manila since March, so it has meant spending months and months at home without going outside. Thank you, Lord, for the gift of prayer and community. I understand exactly what the Psalmist states – “If the Lord had not been on our side, we would have been swallowed alive!” (Psalm 124:2). If the Lord had not been by my side in all the challenges, I would have been swallowed up!

It is a gift in prayer to be able to come as I am. To simply be in front of the Lord. Fr. Jaime Bonet, the Verbum Dei founder, reminded us,

I would advise that each one be himself or herself before God; that they keep the same personality in prayer as outside of it. You have to be you; spontaneity is very important, being natural, something that is acquired with freedom. If you are nice and you always smile, I want to imagine that with Jesus you do not behave in a surly way and with a long face. (Jaime Bonet, *Así será tu descendencia*, Theme 23:2)

The rhythm of prayer has been my salvation. To begin the day in the chapel with the Lord, spending time reflecting on the Word of God and dialoging with Jesus. Also, the daily rosary, a moment to be with Mother Mary, and the importance of regular examination to keep an eye on the interior garden, and see how the fruits and flowers are growing, or not. In front of many situations where I was perplexed or confounded, the Lord was stable, faithful and firm. The rhythm of prayer meant I was able to live more situations in faith, again as Fr. Jaime underlined,

The life of faith is attained with the repetition of acts of faith that, when they are linked one to the other, produce a state of faith. In the morning, we say, “I believe in you, you are within me.” But, if this act is not repeated, the world will trap us. Instead, if these acts of faith are repeatedly done, we will come to live in a habitual state of faith. (Jaime Bonet, *Así será tu descendencia*, Theme 9:18)

To live in faith, to keep the faith, and in this way to continue to give life to the Body of Christ, pandemic or no pandemic.

I was able to put some of my reflections together in a new book titled *A Life of Prayer*. The focus was 30 days of exercises with the Word of God. Stella, one of the readers of the book commented, “The book *A Life of Prayer* encourages us to keep praying and to keep trying to build a life of prayer even in challenging times like this pandemic. The book shows us to hold on, against all odds, to this rock of praying with the Word of God. It also helps us develop the kind of prayer where we can name, face and (at least begin to) process with the Lord all the difficult emotions, thoughts

and events that this pandemic has brought us. It also teaches us the kind of prayer that trains us to spot angels and numerous graces that the Lord continues to send us throughout this time. The reflections contained in the book also teach us the kind of prayer that helps us listen to the Lord's heart, and to the many things He yearns to do for our suffering world – through the minds, hearts and hands of ordinary people like us whom He can send and empower." Another reader, Marichelle, wrote, "We live by FAITH. We can only strengthen this through our prayer life. The book *A Life of Prayer* is an important tool to have a strong foundation on our faith especially in this pandemic where there are many uncertainties."

Life Givers in the Body of Christ

This pandemic has made me more strongly united to the situation of the suffering Christ and to be more connected to the Mystical Body of Christ. Each one of us can have a positive influence in the Body of Christ. As Pope Pius XII encouraged us, the salvation of many depends on the prayer and sacrifice of the few (see *Mystici Corporis Christi*, no. 44). Throughout the pandemic, we have continued with our Verbum Dei School of Apostles, forming the lay people to be mature Christians, apostles, in the world of today. An apostle is a Christian geared up not only to receive, but who has learned how to give. Fr. Jaime Bonet, FMVD, reassures us of the efficacy of our lives being able to give life to the whole Body of Christ, using the image of an injection in the vein of the arm which brings healing to the entire body:

Our lives greatly influence the whole Body of Christ because applying Life to some people, it also gives life to the entire Body. I would say that it is something similar to what happens in the human body when an injection is put into a vein, or a certain part of the body. Maybe the person has a sore, a microbe, a disease in a part of the body and the injection is given at a distant site in the body. However, the result is that it heals the sick part and achieves the health of that damaged part. The intention is to heal the diseased part. The effect affects the whole body. Thus, in an analogous way, it happens in the

Body of Christ. (Fr Jaime Bonet, *Familiares de Dios*, Spiritual Exercises given to Married Couples in August 1999, p. 544)

And so, my Magnificat comes to an end. The “Mighty one has indeed done great things” (see Luke 1:49). The Psalms echo this gratitude – “The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad” (Psalm 126:3). Thank you, Holy Spirit, that in spite of, or even through the pandemic, you desire and enable that we can continue to be life-givers in the Body of Christ. Amen.

PART III

OUTREACH MINISTRY

Pastoring the Religiously Wounded

Shiju Paul, SVD¹
(USA)

Pharaoh asked the brothers, “What is your occupation?” “Your servants are shepherds,” they replied to Pharaoh, “Just as our fathers were.” They also said to him, “We have come to live here for a while, because the famine is severe in Canaan and your servants’ flocks have no pasture. So now, please let your servants settle in Goshen.” (Gen 47:1-4)

Shepherding is our mission. It turns out to be far more challenging when reaching out to religiously wounded people living in the social peripheries of our society. The coronavirus pandemic has inflicted these stigmatized landscapes and pastures even further. I regularly minister as a volunteer at a transitional living and recovery home in Chicago for individuals who have been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS and who are homeless or at-risk for homelessness. Regular intake of antiretrovirals keeps HIV in check to boost the body’s immune system, specifically CD4 cells, which fight off infections. Therefore, there is an urgent need for them to stay as healthy as possible; this need is more important than ever during this time of public health emergency caused by the pandemic.

Most of the members for group meditation are persons who struggle with harmful opioid and alcohol use disorders. Many are stigmatized because of their identification as LGBTQIA+, an umbrella term with particular

¹ Shiju Paul, SVD is a priest in the Society of the Divine Word. For the past three years, he has been serving as part of the formation team for the Society’s theology students at the Thelogate in Chicago. Recently, he was assigned to work with Jesuit Refugee Service in South Sudan.

differences within each of these groups with regard to sexual attraction, behavior and orientation. Some of them are returning citizens (formerly or currently incarcerated people). The COVID-19 pandemic impacts them harshly as our most vulnerable populations in the society. They have been already throttled about by multiple losses and grief in life prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. One of the group members had expressed his concern about coronavirus as early as December during one of our check-ins. At that time, we underestimated the severity of the virus. Though the risk of developing severe COVID-19 in people living with HIV is evolving, current medical research suggests there is less of a risk factor for severe COVID-19 for them if antiretroviral treatment is routinely continued.

The residents and staff of the center requested that I continue offering them the guided meditations as a support for living through the difficult times further aggravated by the pandemic. Prior to the end of March 2020, the sessions were conducted in person at the center; however, the present circumstance has forced these sessions to go online, with Zoom serving as the platform. I mostly use guided mindfulness and compassion meditation practices with the group. It deepens our sense of being in connection in the universe, with others and with ourselves in a loving way in order to become the fully realized persons we are meant to be. I call this fully realized state as our Christ Consciousness experienced in the present moment as connection and communion. Meditation practice consists of a variety of techniques and paths that assist a person in undergoing a life-transforming process when dealing with uncertainties. It includes Check-ins, Meditation Process, Personal Sharing and if need be, use of Ritual. Meditation practices employ integral tools such as breathing, body scan, energy centers, focused relaxation, mantra repetition etc., for recognizing and integrating ongoing pandemic related thoughts, feelings, sensations and behaviors. In this time of pandemic, the loop of ruminative thinking driven by fear, anger and sadness perpetuate the emotions of anxiety and stress. I offer this program as a prayer ministry with a people who sense a great sense of vulnerability and a whirlpool of challenging emotions. This helps them in their capacity for response-ability to ever

changing situations rather than to react in fear to overwhelming scenarios of the pandemic.

In this article I share practicing mindfulness and compassion meditation in times of pandemic as a creative way of pastoring people to overcome the feelings of uncertainty and stress we confront on a daily basis. It grounds us to the present moment in what I call the Christ Consciousness through the lens of faith. If we are rooted and impelled by this consciousness, we lead our daily lives more healthily rather than struggling by focusing on the imaginative bleak prospects of the pandemic. Therefore, in this essay I focus on the process of a meditation session with the group and how it grounds them to the present moment by feeling and sensing what we have to feel and sense during the time of pandemic. The pastoral challenge is even bigger when reaching out to people impacted by stigma and injustices they have experienced from churches, families, and society due to HIV status, sexual orientation, sex, race, gender, etc. even before the current pandemic.

The Healing Power of Check-ins

During this time of physical distancing and shelter at home orders enforced by the pandemic, every human interaction and connection makes a difference. People living with HIV/AIDS have experienced the pain of disconnection, isolation, and stigmatization even before the current coronavirus pandemic began. There are similarities between the HIV and coronavirus pandemic, especially in reference to coping with stress, fear, uncertainty, stigma, and other chronic conditions. The current pandemic aggravated their stressful situations further as a vulnerable group as there is an increased focus on maintaining a healthy immune system.

One-on-one check-ins at the beginning of a group session has been my standard operating procedure in ministry. It is a simple practice of everyone gathered as a group taking turns to share a few sentences about themselves to others. This step increases mutual empathy, kindness and our faith in one another as a group. Instead of diving right into virtual

meditation sessions, we spend some time catching up and checking in on each other. I use check-ins deliberately to further their progress in recovery in order to return to the mainstream of life as responsible citizens. During check-ins group members are guided by ground rules co-constructed by members themselves. All are encouraged to avoid the traps of fixing, advice giving and judging others. We use I statements with vocabularies of inclusion, respect for racial diversity and gender differences when speaking and listening. The guiding question is how are you feeling today at this moment of global pandemic and what's new or anything different in your life since we last checked in the meditation group a week ago. I have observed at different times most members start their sharing with a sense of gratitude by tuning in to their body, listening to the physical cues.

Check-ins generate an expansive sense of belonging among the members that cuts through race and gender. It is an opportunity that provides all a time to intentionally share their fears and anxieties from the heart space with openness, trust and vulnerability. I have noticed in myself that their sharing from a space of vulnerability inspired me to speak up about my own struggles in life in the group. My authentic sharing and listening helped someone else to share even something more revelatory and inviting. As a result, many members experienced co-residents as members of a family striving towards greater healing and integration with an intimate sense of belonging. Members also share their financial stress caused by the pandemic. Most of them were unable to work because their employers closed or lost business, and for some the pandemic prevented job-seeking activities. As fellow group members though we cannot make it better, but we can always listen and grieve with others in the group.

Generally, every member is encouraged to do the check-ins. Their voices provide me the resources for the specific type of meditation to be used in the group on the given day. For example, I remember using the traditional three Buddhist refuges when I noticed a staff member of Buddhist practices turning up for meditation. The triple refuges are: I take refuge in Buddha or the capacity for awakening; I take refuge

in the Dhamma or the teachings/nature of reality; I take refuge in the Sangha or the community/practitioners on the path. Members were surprised that I, a Catholic priest, used Buddhist refuges for an hour of meditation. I explained to them later on that as someone on the Christ path, Christ-Consciousness is my resource of awareness, Reign of God is my teaching, and all-inclusive table fellowship is my loving community. When I noticed a young African-American man of Islamic faith turning up for meditation, I requested the Spiritual Care team to order a prayer mat for him to pray for which he was ever grateful.

The meditation group had members of all religious denominations and spiritual backgrounds: Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, “spiritual but not religious”, “not a believer”, etc. Most of them had left their faith traditions and resorted to spirituality. I recall one of them quoting Vine Deloria, Jr.: “Religion is for people who are afraid of going to hell and spirituality is for those who have already been there.” Therefore, check-ins offered a safe space to talk honestly about oneself in mutual trust. Gradually, the meditation group became a well-knit group in which everyone’s voice was heard and they mutually accompanied one another towards responsible living.

Meditation and Mindfulness Practices as Pathways to Calm Pandemic Anxiety

People living with HIV/AIDS in recovery suffer from multiple losses. The ever-evolving coronavirus has brought in further disruption into their lives as sheltering at home policy and no more out of home activities are still continued. It mounts added pressure on them by social media vibes such as “Zoom happy hours” and virtual substance memes to edge off pandemic anxiety. They feel the pressure to grab a drink or compulsion to use substance to edge off pandemic anxiety and stress. Always confined to the center and not being able to visit friends or enjoy many out-of-home activities during summer leaves some people feeling stressed out even more. Tara Brach, a well known American psychologist and a widely respected teacher of Mindfulness Meditation and a practitioner of

Buddhism, quoted the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh in one of her recent talks during the pandemic: “When the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked all would be lost. But if even one person on the boat remained calm and centered, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive.” I use mindfulness-based meditation practices as a pastoral outreach program in my ministry with the recovery group. It has helped them to take time off to recognize and cope with their inner chattering and its strong varying emotions like fear, sadness, and grief caused by so much uncertainty.

Transcending 4F through Meditation

I found it very meaningful to use the *Hand Model of the Brain* developed by world famous neuroscientist Dr. Daniel Siegel in scientifically explaining what meditation is all about to a group of religiously wounded people. He divided the brain into three regions known as the brainstem, the limbic area, and the cortex distributed bottom to top. This flow from the lower/ inward brainstem region to the limbic area and then to the outer/higher cortex is called the vertical integration and linking the functions of the two halves of the left and right brain is called the horizontal integration. The brainstem or the reptilian brain receives input from the body gathered through our five senses and sends input back down again to regulate our states of functioning. It also shapes the energy levels of the brain areas above it, the limbic and cortical regions which in turn control the fight-flight-freeze-faint array of responses responsible for our survival at times of danger such as the pandemic. The limbic brain or the mammalian brain responsible for our emotions, arousal and relationships evaluates our current situation and when stressed it secretes a hormone that stimulates the adrenals to release high levels of cortisol that increase our stress levels. The outer layer of the brain is called the cortex which creates a world beyond the survival reactions that allows us insight into the inner world of mindfulness, empathy and compassion. It deeply connects us to our external environment and we create our mind-sight maps for healthy interactions. It enables a person to move beyond the sub-cortex pattern of fight-flight-freeze-faint looping into a space that enables us to respond from empathy, and radical compassion.

Practices of mindfulness and meditation reconnect the flip over lid of our limbic system by reactivating the prefrontal cortex.

Meditation as Self-Compassion in Trying Times

There are many pathways to experience self-compassion in trying times such as the pandemic. Most of my meditations are developed under the following framework using appropriate Biblical images and phrases largely depending on the participants. There are specific meditations that bring holistic integration and relaxation that focuses on the physical, mental, emotional, relational and spiritual well-being.

I begin the meditation by inviting the participants to enter into deep relaxation through a guided pathway of depth awareness. It is the awareness of body, sounds, breath, sounds (inner and outer), sensations, feelings, thoughts, images, color, light, and the awareness of “I am in I AM.” Gradually I settle down into the YHWH Meditation in which participants are encouraged to inhale- YAH and exhale WEH or any other comfortable soothing phrase. Breathing the name of God is our first and last act on this earth. It grounds us to the reality of increased awareness about our mortality during the pandemic times. This process leads one to the total recognition of pandemic related thoughts and feelings churning within. As breathing slips into the background of awareness, pandemic related emotions of uncertainty such as fear, anger, and sadness etc., the person is most aware of are recognized and labeled as it arises and subsides. Participants consciously acknowledge the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors impacted by the pandemic by simply allowing it to be there without trying to fix or to avoid them. Particular emotions are experienced as felt sensations in different parts of the body. In some parts of the body, it is felt very intensely. At this stage the physical component of an emotion is noted and it is held in mindful and kind awareness. Body awareness of sensations, just like our thoughts and feelings, rises and subsides. Participants are encouraged to return to the sensation of the rhythm of breathing in one’s body when the mind wanders away in thoughts. At this stage I introduce the tender and compassionate relationship to difficult emotions

such as Soften–Soothe–Allow or SSA coined by Kristin Neff, a pioneering researcher into self-compassion when dealing with emotions. I give my participants the option of whispering Biblical images and phrases into the most hurting place inside them after receiving their permission at the beginning of the meditation.

In short, during meditation the person becomes mindfully aware of every signal coming from the outside world of pandemic, and in turn the person grows in mindful awareness of what is coming up inside, and let go of what is coming at the person. Staying with the experience of the main sensation rising and falling in one's consciousness supported by intentional breathing until it disappears completely, paves the way for total relaxation and softening of the stressful areas in the body. Gradually deep relaxation comes into the entire body in depth awareness. When absorbing and nurturing what they have just experienced sends one into deep relaxing silence. Participants have shared that in deep silence they see divine images, aura or color, and a shining light emerging and enveloping them. Some participants are able to experience total oneness at this phase of meditation.

Sharing Meditation Experience

After the meditation I invite participants to share whatever they feel comfortable sharing. Every meditation session creates a field of awareness of our shared humanity in the midst of ongoing pandemic. They share how they experienced the meditation, what they noticed in themselves and what was most comforting or challenging about the meditation process. If time permitted, I proceeded to invite the participants to spontaneously draw their experiences by using their non-dominant hand as a creative way of expressing the inner process.

Conclusion

How can I as a priest pastorally accompany people through this time of pandemic as outbreaks continue to rise? As physical distancing and sheltering at home became the mantra of the current crisis, connecting with

people through virtual media platforms to offer support through meditation and mindfulness practices was a gesture of pastoral care and accompaniment. It helped them move through the external changes caused by the pandemic and the internal emotional transitions. The meditation group gradually turned out to be a caring and compassionate community who were able to view themselves as part of a much larger picture with a renewed sense of purpose and hopefulness in life. They appreciate all volunteers and staff showing up for them as the coronavirus outbreak continues to take its toll on people. Like the early Christian community, we gathered as a house church in a digital space, small in number. Pope Francis calls the doctors and nurses, essential workers and volunteers who risk the pandemic to keep our daily life rolling as “the saints next door.”

The coronavirus pandemic challenges us for greater introspection in our ways of embodying radical compassion of Jesus especially with persons who suffer stigmatization, discrimination and exclusion. The pandemic brought in to light the social and economic divides that disproportionately impacted people on the margins because of their age, race, gender and economic status. The new normal will force us to revisit our pastoral paradigms. One of the challenges will be the task of addressing religious recession with declining church participation. It is also notable that an increasing number of people are finding time and space for spiritual connection through practices such as mindfulness meditations. Let us not resist stubbornly the new awakenings and invitations of the creative spirit swaying in the wind in the time of pandemic to enter into our impenetrable protective bubbles of pastoral security, ecclesial status quo and imperial images of Jesus.

A Facebook COVID-19 Hotline for Undocumented Vietnamese Migrant Workers in Thailand

Maria Tien Phan¹
(Thailand)

Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit Thailand in March 2020, my life was rather busy. Besides working in the human resource department at Assumption University in Bangkok, I also had side job as a freelance tour guide to earn extra income. Having these two jobs kept me busy on the weekdays as well as most weekends. Having come to Thailand from Vietnam to study in the university, after graduation, I decided to continue living in the “Land of Smiles” to continue my life.

The coronavirus pandemic put a large dent in my routines, especially my freelance work. Although there were intervals when the university had to be closed and I had to work from home, that part of my job remains somewhat stable. As a young person, I am able to adapt to having to communicate with my colleagues and carry out various office related tasks from home. I could not say the same for my side job. With Thailand closing its land borders to neighboring countries and extremely small number of people coming in by air, the tourism industry, which I depend on as a significant source of extra income, has virtually come to a standstill. Until the country opens itself up again and significant number of tourists arrive, I will have to get through with a reduced income.

Of course, I am not alone in having to deal with the impact of the crisis.

¹ Maria Tien Phan is from Da Nang, Vietnam. She works in the Human Resource Department of Assumption University in Bangkok, Thailand. She came to Thailand in 2010 as a university student and stayed on after graduation.

Some have been affected even much worse, including undocumented Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand who lost their livelihood due to closure of restaurants, pubs, bars, and other service related venues where most of them work. The vast majority of Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand work long hours in jobs such as serving in restaurants, selling vegetables at the market, peddling fruit and ice cream on the streets, and attending parking lots. Needless to say, the pandemic has hit this community hard with few options other than waiting and hoping for things to return to some level of normalcy as prior to the crisis. In the meantime, with the country closed off and no flights between Thailand and Vietnam, many are stuck in the country, trying to make ends meet, and hoping that the pandemic will soon cease so they can go back to making a living.

As an extrovert, the pandemic was initially difficult on me because I get energy from being with and meeting people. I have good relationships with many people in Thailand – both Thai and Vietnamese. With less money but more time on my hand, I take comfort in having the extra time to read books that have been gathering dust on the shelf, more time to talk to my parents in Vietnam, and reconnect with old friends through social media. I even have more time to take care of my cactus plants.

When Thailand experienced its second wave near the end of 2020, the number of people infected in the country jumped dramatically. Whereas in the first wave, the highest one-day total of new infection cases was 188, this number was nearly 1,000 during the second wave. In the Vietnamese migrant community, the level of anxiety was heightened because the second wave allegedly began with migrant workers from Myanmar at a fresh seafood market in Samut Sakhon Province, just outside of Bangkok. It then spread to other cities and provinces throughout the country, even to areas where many Vietnamese migrant workers were staying. At Bangyay market in Nonthaburi province, where there are many Vietnamese migrants working, there were news that a Vietnamese had been infected after being in close contact with a worker from Myanmar. Likewise, some Vietnamese from other provinces were also reported to

have been infected. This was unlike the first wave, in which there were no reports of Vietnamese being infected in the community.

Because of the increasing fear and anxiety among Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand, there was a need for regular, up-to-date, and pertinent information to help Vietnamese migrants understand the situation in order to allay fear, eliminate the spread of rumors and misinformation, and to provide basic consultation to people who may have questions such as where to get COVID-19 tests and what the cost of treatment for foreigners might be. For many Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand, their grasp of Thai language, especially formal Thai, is limited and they could not always follow the situation closely and accurately. They often have to depend on news from other individuals in the community who are more informed for information. Unfortunately, such information, usually transmitted via Facebook is not always accurate and can cause unnecessary panic and stress to the people who come across it. It must be noted that although many Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand have some command of the Thai language in order to work, this limited fluency prevents them from understanding adequately about the overall crisis.

It was in this situation that I was approached by a priest from the Pastoral Committee for Vietnamese Migrants under the auspices of the the Bishops Conference of Thailand to create a Facebook COVID-19 “hotline” and information page in order to post useful information about the COVID-19 pandemic to serve the Vietnamese migrant community. I was not only asked to create the page, but also to serve as its administrator and also to answer questions that might come from the people who follow the page. When I heard the request, I felt that this was a difficult task to take on, and I was uncertain if I wanted to accept something as serious as what I was being asked to do. Although it was not difficult to translate relevant news from Thai media into Vietnamese then post onto the page, the task of answering questions that might concern all sorts of matters coming from various people would be a formidable one. Nevertheless, understanding the urgent need presented by the present circumstances, I

agreed to take on the challenge.

Having created the page and serving as its administrator for several months, I have become increasingly more adept at the work. I have learned to understand people's questions which are presented to me in all sorts of manners. I have learned to be patient with people who seemingly ask questions that are beyond my immediate responsibility, giving answers where I am able to.

Based on the questions and reactions that I have received from people who follow the page, I have learned to select and post content that is more relevant to the need of the community. In this digital age, there is an enormous amount of information available, but not all are useful or accurate. It is a true service to people when I am able to provide the essential information needed for the matter at hand.

I believe that Vietnamese people always appreciate acts that display mutual support, especially in times of crisis. In a situation filled with uncertainty, anxiety and fear, this support brings about a warm feeling in those who receive gestures of concern, encouragement, and sharing from others. For myself as a Vietnamese working in Thailand, I am more fortunate than many because I have fluency in the language, a valid work permit, and many relationships with Thai and Vietnamese. It is during times such as this that Vietnamese like to use to popular adage: "The good leaves cover the torn leaves." Vietnamese migrant workers often add an extra line: "The torn leaves cover the tattered ones."

I have responded to the invitation to take on the COVID-19 "Facebook hotline" project serving Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand because I understand that in many ways, we are all in the same boat and we need to cover for one another in any way we can. In reality, after serving as the admin of this page, I have also benefited by gaining more knowledge about the coronavirus pandemic situation in Thailand. I have honed my Thai-to-Vietnamese translation skills. I have also improved my listening skills to respond to the various questions addressed to me.

Most importantly, I have also found myself closer to God because when having to answer questions from the page followers, I usually pray for the Holy Spirit's inspiration and guidance so that I would be able to do my best.

Having taken on this task, I have come to also realize that in our lives as Christians, we are granted many different blessings, especially the seven gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit. Although each person has these gifts in different degrees, all of us are able to put them to use in the big and small situations that we face in our everyday life. Every occasion is an opportunity pushing us to utilize these gifts in order to carry out God's Will in our lives; in the process, helping our brothers and sisters in need, and also improving our own spiritual lives.

The COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand affected Thai people as well as millions of foreigners living and working in Thailand. Among them, there are thousands of undocumented Vietnamese migrant workers – both Catholic and non-Catholic. The decision to create a Facebook COVID-19 information page and hotline was one that was meant to reach out to this oftentimes marginalized group who could not get adequate access to information due to language limitations, could not obtain assistance due to their undocumented status, and who often found themselves bewildered and overwhelmed by the dramatic circumstances around them.

In my position as a young woman and a lay Catholic, although there is only so much that I can do in order to help with the crisis, my decision to become a volunteer admin for this outreach project is an affirmation that in every crisis, each person in the Church can take part in some capacity. It takes a mindset of asking "What can I do to help?" rather than just asking "Why is this happening to me?" or "When is this going to be over?".

Ministry on Palm Island during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Sarita Kurikattil, SSpS¹
(Australia)

During the year 2020 our Townsville/Palm Island community has held in prayer these truths: that we are living in unforeseen, unimaginable and uncertain times in our world's history, in times of worldwide lockdowns in first world countries as well as third world ones, in times when anti-lock down protests and anti-mask wearing protests only increase the risk of this virus spreading. We live in times when so many people fear the unknown, suffer loneliness and isolation, spiral into various forms of mental illness, depression, anxiety, hopelessness, when people from all walks of life experience job losses and desperation as bills flood in and food is scarce, when domestic violence has risen and the sick and elderly die without loved ones by their sides.

¹Sarita Kurikattil, SSpS, a member of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit, was born and raised in India. After making religious profession and studies in Education and Science in India, she spent five years with the Holy Spirit Sisters in the USA. There, she completed her Masters in Pastoral Studies and offered pastoral support in hospitals and prison. Sr. Kurikattil was appointed to the Province of Australia in 2002 where she was first called to be Tertian Directress for sisters from different provinces who were preparing for Final Vows. Afterward, she was appointed to the role of Provincial of Australia. After completing two terms of leadership in this Province, Sr. Kurikattil was appointed to the Townsville/Palm Island Community, where she now works in hospital and prison ministries on the mainland. When on the Island, she serves as a religious presence among the mostly indigenous people who live there.

These are times reminiscent of the Spanish Influenza contagion a century ago. But unlike then, when news travelled very slowly, we are bombarded with news 24 hours a day and 7 days a week – this constant flow of facts and sometimes untruths and the dramatic ways news is conveyed, brings a sense of agitation and concern and a deepening need for prayer for all peoples of the world whatever their faith tradition or circumstances.

I was one of the Sisters on Palm Island off the coast of Queensland when lockdown began. There was little time to prepare as restrictions came upon us with great speed. The members of our small community found that the lockdown gave us unexpected gifts of time to read, time to reflect, time to contemplate, time to communicate and to feel connected, as never before, with the whole of humanity. There was no pressure to ‘do’ but much time to ‘be’. It could be compared to a sabbatical, a time to retreat with God with no urgent calls to attend to our ministries but an unhurried time to find solitude and silence.

We were more than this tiny community in North Queensland for as members of a Missionary Congregation ministering in 50 countries, our concerns were not only for ourselves and for our families in other lands, but for our Sisters wherever they were, some in direct contact with the pandemic, for our Pope broadcasting daily Mass for a worldwide congregation, for the people in refugee camps with no hope of engaging in good hygiene practices, for people of many nations where numbers of infections rose and the daily death tally grew beyond belief, and for this land Australia as the virus took hold and took lives.

We found that our little community had much for which to pray. We recognized this was our call in these times. Lockdown meant prayer was our greatest gift to each other, to our tiny Island home, to our nation and to our world. Our hearts sought deep communion with everyone and everything in the universe.

How concerning it was for us to hear how worldwide travel restrictions denied many the chance to be with sick and dying relatives. Equally

concerning was hearing how families were separated because some were in other countries when lockdown happened. Our whole world was experiencing powerlessness and vulnerability. From some countries, however, we viewed video clips of people on balconies of different buildings singing and playing musical instruments, of others clapping for doctors and nurses, of still more writing encouraging messages on placards and there were stories of citizens showing compassion for the needy. The virus has drawn us into a place to reflect on what truly matters in life – our relationships with God, people and the environment.

During the lockdown, we felt isolated here in our small two-member community on Palm Island. A third Sister belonging to our community remained in our Townsville convent and our fourth Sister remained in South Korea where she had gone on compassionate leave just before lockdown to care for her very sick parents. She is still in South Korea due to the worldwide restrictions on overseas travel.

As our Premier, Health Minister, and Health Care Coordinator advised the citizens of Queensland on rules and regulations, we stayed within our convent walls doing our household chores, reading, gardening, praying for this fragile hurting world and watching Masses either live streamed or available through ‘Mass on Demand’. Our worshipping community expanded. We became one with thousands of people forming a new way of gathering for prayer and worship. We delighted in the daily breaking open of the Word from churches we could never have imagined visiting. Our Lent, Holy Week, and Easter Sunday were conducted as never before but there was something profoundly moving as the two of us on Palm Island participated with people we will never meet in person but have shared deeply with in daily and Sunday Masses. Out of the poverty of being without Mass and Communion, there was suddenly plenty. COVID-19 time has become a ‘loaves and fishes’ story for us.

Many of our missionary activities on Palm Island and Townsville were cancelled until the lockdown was lifted. Our Island was purposely isolated from mainland Australia. There was a police presence on the

waters to stop people coming ashore. Because of a vulnerable population here on Palm, the Health Authorities took these measures to guard against the virus coming onto the island through visitors or returning residents. Fortunately, this worked, and the Island's population was protected.

However, whilst in lockdown we could conduct funerals. We could bless hospital rooms, at the request of the Palm Island hospital staff, after someone had died. We were also able to deliver food boxes from St. Vincent de Paul Society to the families in need. We printed our parish bulletin every week and delivered it to Catholic families. This was one way through which we could assure parishioners of our prayers and enable them to feel connected with God, with the Church and society. Everything we did however was according to the strictest guidelines to protect the Island's residents and also ourselves.

We were privileged to remain a pastoral presence for and with our people here on Palm Island and in Townsville. We were very grateful for the support from our Diocese and the people here on the Island and in Townsville.

Now after the lockdown has been lifted, we are able to gather in the church for Mass and celebration of liturgy with communion. We started having funeral services and baptisms in the church with hand hygiene, social distancing and numbers a high priority. Even though life has resumed some sense of normalcy since restrictions were lifted, we continue to retain an appropriate degree of cautiousness. We don't take our health for granted. We only have to watch the news to grasp that this pandemic has not run its course and is in fact returning in second and third waves.

We remain highly vigilant as we long for the little things we took for granted. We are mindful with our greetings, how we extend a sign of peace during Mass, how we organize gatherings, and whether a space is suitable as a venue. There is a sad but necessary lack of spontaneity, as protocols inform everything we do as a parish community. Even though we embrace the new 'normal', here in North Queensland we

miss different freedoms and that more natural way of coming together for different occasions. We have to plan and consider possible negative consequences before we act. We know the virus might be held at bay, but it certainly has not been eradicated from society.

We are now able to travel to the mainland and I took a little time in Townsville to resume my ministry of prison visitation. Sometime after I returned to Palm Island, I watched as a young woman, head covered with a hoodie, cycled towards me. She called a greeting to me and then asked, 'Do you remember me?' My puzzled expression must have urged her to continue because she said, 'You just visited me in prison.' This experience for me was profound. I glimpsed how God works through us. This young woman had no need to remind me of where we met but her interaction with me has been a blessing beyond words.

Our people on Palm include a significant number of Indigenous people. It is when we are here among this group that we are faced with one of the world's great concerns which was highlighted in the 'Black Lives Matter' protests during this pandemic of COVID-19. The divide is evident here in this country too. We try to stand in solidarity with our Indigenous People by our very presence. We are called to show the first Australians that to us, Holy Spirit Sisters, all lives matter very much. We live among the people to include and serve, set right and respect, celebrate and live a life style that goes by 'Palm Island time', in 'Palm Island style' for an island community. We bring to them our loaves and fishes and listen to how, when and if they want to accept what we have. Each day is different but often a 'girl in a hoodie' moment comes our way and we are grateful for the loaves and fishes offered to us by the people on Palm Island.

To conclude, this experience of COVID-19 pandemic I liken to being caught in a storm, a violent storm where we are tossed and turned, afraid and helpless but we are once again reminded to trust in our God who promises His presence is always with us whatever the strength of the storm.

The intention of our community prayer is that we all be open to hear what the disciples heard from Jesus when they lived in fear in locked rooms, 'Peace be with you.'

Spiritual Nourishment in Time of Crisis: Pastoral Creativity in the Catholic Diocese of Lucknow, India

Joshy Xavier, SJ¹
Lawrence Devin Noronha²
(India)

Amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, India has witnessed a steady and massive surge crossing 10 million cases. As of January 18, 2021, 152,460 deaths have been reported from 32 states/union territories in India. Apart from the nationwide lockdown, India increased its testing rate and has markedly strengthened the health care sector to combat COVID-19. India's population of more than 1.3 billion people and its comparatively high population density especially in the Delhi–National Capital Territory and state capitals, poses a significant challenge to India's fight against COVID-19. Failure to contain the pandemic in India could have disastrous consequences with widespread cases and deaths that could quickly destroy the health care infrastructure. On January 15, 2021, India embarked on a nationwide vaccination campaign (COVAXIN–India's First Indigenous COVID-19 Vaccine), hoping to be the final and ultimate

¹ Joshy Xavier, S J is a priest belonging to the Jamshedpur Province of the Society of Jesus. He is a lecturer and IT Chairperson at the Xavier University, Bhubaneswar – India. He is also a core team member of SIGNIS digital desk.

² Lawrence Devin Noronha is a priest belonging to the Catholic Diocese of Lucknow. He was ordained on 22 October 2017. He served the St. Joseph's Cathedral, Lucknow as an assistant parish priest at for 2 years. At present he renders his service as the Vice Principal of St. Francis' College, Lucknow and Diocesan Assistant Youth Director. He is a talented singer and musician. He has completed Sangeet Prabhakar Degree from Prayaag Sangeet Samithi, (Allahabad) Prayaagraaj.

fight against the pandemic.

In India, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every aspect of our lives. Various standard operating procedures (SOP) and norms to contain the pandemic resulted in lockdowns, work from home (WFH), and social distancing, etc. In the process, the government also closed all religious places of worship and banned all activities where people would have to gather. In this scenario, many dioceses and parishes turned to digital technology to reach out to the faithful. In this respect, the Catholic Diocese of Lucknow has made a remarkable effort to employ Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to connect with a large number of people across the Hindi speaking belt of India.

In this essay, I will recount the effort of responding to the pastoral needs of the faithful by the media team in the Diocese of Lucknow, which is situated in the state of Uttar Pradesh, North India. I had a conversation with Rev. Fr. Lawrence Devin Noronha, one of the initiators of the project to create and maintain a YouTube channel to live stream various liturgical activities for the benefit of the people. The following paragraphs relate the significant points that emerged from my discussion with Fr. Lawrence (mostly in his own words).

Creation of Online Programming in Response to Pastoral Need

Although the pandemic started before the Lenten Season 2020, the government imposed the lockdown two weeks before Palm Sunday. The period of Lent is very sacred for Catholics and the people are aware of its importance and spiritual significance. During Lent, many people regularly go to church for the Eucharist and confession. There is a lot of enthusiasm among the people to participate in the Way of the Cross Liturgy on Good Friday. Lent is also the time when people reflect on reconciliation, forgiveness, and love. Suddenly, the effect of the pandemic was felt and lockdowns were announced. This situation confronted us with uncertainty and confusion, not certain of how to deal with the challenges set before us.

Because there was complete lockdown, people were indoors, and many did not know how to use the extra time. So, we felt that we had to engage the people and connect them with God. As we reflected on the matter, we realized that most people in the city of Lucknow had internet connection. Most of the mobile service providers gave least 1 or 2 GB of data with most of the mobile packages. If we did not guide them and feed them with some good content, they will waste this data by watching movies and other entertainment materials online. At that time, the phone served as the primary way for people to pass the time because they could not go anywhere.

One day, some parishioners told me that some other parishes and organizations were holding live programs for their parishioners and followers on social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. We gave some thoughts to this idea, but we had not experimented previously with online platforms. To produce such programs would be a great challenge for us.

In addition to the lack of knowledge and technological equipment, the lockdown made it not immediately possible for us to create a professional technical team. Many of the television networks were unable to function and had to rebroadcast old programs. However, the thought of doing something immediately haunted us, and we decided to come together and act. Once our minds were made up, God inspired us to venture into it. Even today we feel God's divine accompaniment in this journey.

In the beginning, we simply looked for the things we already had as the shops were not open. We managed to collect a laptop, a mixer, and a webcam. Afterward, we had to explore how to go live on our YouTube channel,³ which was created on March 29, 2020. We were informed that in order to have live mobile broadcasts, our channel had to have at least 1,000 subscribers. Thus, we put out an announcement calling for people to subscribe, and within a day we managed to achieve our goal of subscribers. This demonstration of responses shows that the people were

³(<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4yPADjIgJdGcHtY4nBWeEQ>)

very eager to receive our service. Indeed, the prime motivation to venture online was to quench the spiritual thirst of the people during the Lenten season. We felt that we needed to accompany the people spiritually and keep them connected with God and one another.

Initial Success with Online Events

The first event we went live was the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Although we did not know much about audience analytics, getting 100 live viewers for the adoration was very satisfying. The live chat in the chat session manifested the faith of the people and their gratitude to God. The response from the viewers, which was a very small group mainly from the city of Lucknow, was also very encouraging. Soon our live events were having up to 1,000 viewers. This motivated us even further. The viewers were excited about this new way of participating in the liturgical services, and once we got more subscribers, we also learned to use the YouTube studio and its analytic capability to know many details about the viewers.

Although nobody was professionally trained, we were able to do the programs with the invaluable support of the youth group, especially two of them who had great knowledge about technology. As Palm Sunday and Holy Week approached, we gained more technical competence and prepared the programs better. Despite the fact that there were other online platforms, we found YouTube to be more effective in reaching out to a large number of people. Moreover, the live chat and comment sessions provided us with feedback which we could use to improve the programs. We also received support from our bishop, Most Rev. Gerald John Mathias, who informed the people about the creation of the new YouTube channel and assured them that the entire Holy Week services would be live streamed on this platform. He also encouraged the people to remain in prayer. He continued to support us, and appreciated and encouraged our efforts as we carried on with the project.

Thus, despite the initial lack of professional knowledge in online technology and having many doubts about our ability to pull the project

off, we managed to execute it successfully. Part of the reason was because there was a strong inner divine calling and assurance to “Go ahead! I am with you.” That inner voice was very supportive and compelling. It helped us to act without being anxious about the outcome.

Another factor contributing to the success was people’s responses and their gratitude. Many people thanked us. The people felt the presence of God, though in a limited manner and in a different way, but directly through a digital medium. “Thank you, at least we can still connect with God through this” was the common response of both the young and old. They also felt proud that the diocese was also doing something new. Other media people were enquiring about our programs, and some journalists also subscribed to the channel. They too appreciated the effort and reported about our online activities in the local newspapers.⁴ The people also shared information about the channel and its programs with one another.

Our initial target audience was the people of Lucknow with the programs primarily in Hindi since there were already many other English channels in existence. However, at times we also had English services to accommodate some sections of the parishioners. As it turned out, the Hindi speaking people benefited a lot, not just those from our own diocese but also from the dioceses of other states like Jharkhand, Bihar, Gujrat, Delhi, Maharashtra, and Odisha. As our programs garnered more online interest, our channel gradually transcended the local region. We realized that people were spiritually connected, and as a community, were benefiting from the programs. The analytics which provided the demographic details of our diverse viewers truly delighted us.

One important thing to be noted is that none of the programs were pre-recorded. Many of the programs were live broadcasts of prayer sessions that we were simply conducting for ourselves, and at the same time, live streamed for people to participate online. We thought, anyway we are

⁴<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/lucknow-churches-livestream-good-friday-service-amid-coronavirus-lockdown/articleshow/75086121.cms>

praying, why not then let people accompany us in our prayer?

We had a very successful online celebration of the Year of the Word of God. We conducted online competitions for our diocese. Competition items included Biblical recitations, psalm recitals, speak 4 the Lord, dance 4 the Lord and your favourite saints (November). The competitions were conducted for the children, youth, the families and the religious houses. The events were also evaluated for views and likes, which prompted them to share their videos with their friends. This event was one of the best ways of evangelization. During Christmas we had jingle bells carol singing, tableau competition, drawing competition, and competitions on Biblical themes where they could proclaim the word of God. A lot of creativity and group work marked these competitions.

Overcoming the Digital Divide

Although we were happy that the people were watching as they had the data available, there were also people who did not have internet and who did not have a smart phone. Also, there were people who did not even have a mobile phone. This scenario also raised some questions and concerns. Those who had smart phones and who watched our programs were availed to have this new kind of spiritual experience. One thing we were certain was that the pandemic was motivating many people to pray. Thus, one solution we devised was to have a common telephone number to which the faithful could send their prayer requests. Those who accessed our programs shared that number with those who did not have access. Most of the people who requested prayers were stranded labourers, labourers in transit, daily wage workers, and poor people from across the Hindi speaking belt and beyond. There were also people who sought counselling and others who just wanted to share about themselves.

Those who watched the program shared their experience with their friends, neighbours and relatives through the phone, thus making their experience of prayer a shared experience in the wider community. With some families, a smart phone had to be shared among the members

– the children when they needed to study online, and the parents and grandparents when they needed to attend the online spiritual programs.

Our programs were able reach many more than anticipated. It even transcended the national boundaries. Some of our videos had about 5-8 percent Hindi speaking NRI viewers. According to the analytics, the highest number of viewers were of the age group 25 to 35 and the youngsters were the main beneficiaries. Among the viewers, 55% were women. Our programs were especially beneficial to the elderly and the bedridden people who could not go to church. Thus, we truly did a service for people who were suffering and were facing all kinds of challenges of pain and agony, and isolation; people who had lost hope, who had been separated from their family members; labourers stranded in faraway cities and those in transit by foot or cycle. In the process, as a necessity even the elderly people also learned how to use smart phones. Some (even non-Christians) acknowledged watching the services online drew them to God. They found that there was something very unique in this channel compared to many other channels.

Matters to Consider in Online Programming

The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist is more structured and is the supreme sacrifice of the Lord and so it is the source and summit of Christian life. Here the Eucharist is very much clergy oriented and lay participation level is less. Since it is very structured, we cannot bring much innovation and creativity into it. However, popular devotions allow for this innovation and creativity. Initially we started with Divine Mercy novena at 3 pm for nine days. This novena brought a lot of spiritual benefit to the people. I, too, received abundant blessings from the Lord through this novena. Later on, we also started a Musical Rosary after much hard work and effort. Novenas and Rosaries attracted many non-Christians and Christians of other denominations. These celebrations brought a lot of blessings and healing to many people who felt touched by the grace of God. We also had testimonies during adoration, novenas, and Rosaries, etc. Some experienced healings and deep spiritual nourishment as a result

of participating in these programs. Such individual experiences of grace in turn strengthened the entire faith community. We strongly believe that a ministry such as this needs a very solid prayer back up and support. God will give us viewers and participants but through our prayers we sustain and empower them.

Later, when the churches were open for physical Masses, we stopped streaming Sunday Masses as that would make the people to stay at home. However, when the sick, the elderly and children who were forbidden to come to Church made requests for online Mass, we continued them for on Fridays. However, we did not have the Sunday broadcast in order to encourage all the people to come to the church as a day of obligation.

Final Reflections

Using audio-visual materials, we reached out to many people especially when using online platforms. We did have very resourceful priests and preachers who could give short speeches and inspired people. We should have channels through which we can speak the word of God. At the same time, we should ask the Lord, what He wants. God should be the centre of all plans and executions. We may try to do many things, but in the end God acts. Everything depends on God. Popularity or number of viewers is not as important as helping the people to experience God and becoming transformed by this experience.

During lockdown, children missed their catechism classes. Many people, especially children and the elderly, could not get access to the sacraments of Eucharist and reconciliation. Online liturgy does not make the Eucharist complete as the participants cannot receive the Lord sacramentally which is very important. Media has to enhance the participation of the people in the right manner and right disposition. Also, these online activities should not make the people lethargic as they can easily go back to the online and look at old videos. So, we have to be vigilant also and we should not allow things to be taken for granted.

A media project such as this should be evolving, emerging and progressing. God's hand is at work in all these things. It is the Lord's work. It is His blessing. We need prayer to be successful in this and we need to ask God for direction. We need to constantly check whether we are doing His will. And God will confirm us by providing extraordinary faith experiences. Using our talents for God is like bearing fruit for the Lord. We look at this project through the lens of two scriptural passages.

1. Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more (Rom 5:20)

Although the internet is a great gift from God, it is often abused by its users. If we consume its content without wise discernment, we could easily lose ourselves. Today a lot of unethical activities are mediated through the internet. But the same medium can also be God's vineyard. God uses the same media in a different manner to use for His glory. Through channels such as this, we allow the spirit of God to flourish, which in turn will nourish us.

2. "The days are coming," declares the Sovereign LORD, "when I will send a famine through the land-- not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD. (Amos 8:11)

We see that during this adverse period of pain and isolation, the people hungered for the Word of God. The project was to collaborate with God in quenching their thirst for the Word of God.

The project exhibited teamwork and leadership. It brought together priests, sisters, youth and youth leaders for the benefit of the faithful. We also see all the leadership roles and training that we gave them early is bearing fruit. Youth have learnt to take initiatives and responsibility and collaborated with one another. Moreover, it united the faith community – all for the greater glory of God.

Ministry during COVID-19: A Mixed Bag

Len Uhal¹
(USA)

The first COVID-19 death in our little corner of Northeast Iowa was on March 24, 2020; however, even before that, changes to the status quo began taking place: People started wearing masks, social distancing was the new buzz phrase and schools went online as teachers started teaching virtually. The closure of churches soon followed, and they remained closed for public worship until Pentecost on May 31.

Everyone responded so differently to the changes caused by the pandemic. From immediate fear that led to self-isolation to denial that caused anger and outrage, the pandemic had a different effect on people of all ages and backgrounds. I, too, evolved in my response to the pandemic and the precautions recommended. In the early weeks, I remember my wife wearing a mask into grocery stores and I walked by her side cautiously, but maskless, thinking this will pass soon and probably is no big deal. However, as news outlets reported more cases and deaths locally, nationally and globally began to mount, I became more concerned. Within weeks, I was wearing a mask all the time when around others

¹ Len Uhal is the National Vocation Director for the Divine Word Missionaries. After eight years of formation with the SVD, he married in 1990. He lives in Dubuque, Iowa with his wife, Sue, and he has three children and two grandchildren. Len earned a BA from Divine Word College in Epworth, Iowa, and a MS from Cardinal Stritch University in Milwaukee. Prior to returning to minister with the SVDs, he worked for twelve years as a certified drug and alcohol counselor and a licensed social worker. Together with a team of SVD priests and brothers, he has served in vocation ministry since 2003.

indoors and I became very conscious of my proximity to others, always looking to keep distance from others—to protect them and myself.

Our parish reopened to Sunday worship on Pentecost and as active parishioners, my wife, our youngest son (age 20) who still lives at home, and I were eager to pray again with our parish faith community. COVID-19 precautions were printed in our diocesan newspaper including such things as attendees at Mass wearing masks, keeping social distance from others, not exchanging the sign of peace, not receiving Holy Communion on the tongue, etc. We were eager to return to weekly Mass as watching it on the internet was not quite the same.

Upon our arrival that Sunday morning, we were surprised that about 20% of those attending Mass did not wear any face coverings, including the priest, ushers and other leaders in the parish, such as the parish council president. We were taken aback by others' nonchalant attitude towards the necessary precautions. Despite people separated by using every other pew, no singing, alternating sides for the Communion procession and other precautions, we did not feel safe passing others without masks. Who knew that this single issue would be so divisive?

We reluctantly and cautiously continued attending weekly Sunday Mass until early in August. Our city issued a mask mandate on August 6 and we thought, surely after the city issued a mandate that included churches, everyone at our parish, including the leaders, would wear a mask for the care and safety of others. I was the scheduled lector at our 9:30 AM Mass on August 9. I was overwhelmed with emotion when to my surprise, many people were still maskless. I know the Holy Spirit spoke through me as I proclaimed the Word that day because inside me, I was raging—full of emotions from anger to sadness to confusion. After Mass, I informed the pastoral leadership that I would not return to the parish until people decided to take the pandemic seriously and take the necessary precautions to keep people safe.

I do not feel safe attending Mass at my parish. I feel abandoned and betrayed by both the leadership and some of my fellow parishioners. It has been over

four months since I last attended my home parish for Mass. No one has reached out to me from the pastoral team to inquire about how I am doing. I have not participated in my regular ministries as a lector and Eucharistic Minister since August 9. While I have found another local parish to attend weekly Mass where I do feel safe and I believe everyone is taking the best pandemic precautions possible, it is not quite the same. I miss my parish.

I share the above story to illustrate that it is not only the pandemic itself that makes ministry during COVID-19 difficult, but also the lack of an appropriate response and pastoral care and leadership for everyone in the parish family. While challenging, reaching out to meet the needs of all within a parish setting is important. I am a pretty active member of our parish—past pastoral council member, former president of parish board of education/faith formation council, past capital campaign steering committee member, etc. In addition, I am the current chair of our parish’s social justice committee. If I feel so concerned about our parish’s response to the pandemic, how do others feel?

Despite COVID-19 and the lack of appropriate precautions at Sunday Liturgy, our parish’s social justice committee continues its mission—to collect funds and support people in need. Our mission is especially important during this pandemic as there has been an increase in need, especially for many who now face food insecurity because they have lost their jobs. Many folks who never needed assistance in the past now find themselves asking for help.

Our committee canceled its March 2020 meeting when all church-related activities were canceled because all churches were closed. However, we quickly pivoted to online meetings via Zoom to continue to plan and implement activities to support people at this time. Since March, our committee and parish members have helped prepare over 450 meals at churches and homeless shelters and donated nearly \$2,000 to organizations that provide food to those in need. As I write today, we are currently sponsoring our Christmas Giving Tree where we will help about 20 families with presents and food this Christmas season. Over

the past two years, we provided 45 families with 774 Christmas gifts for parents and children and over \$2,000 in grocery store gift cards in order to make their Christmas a bit brighter. We are on pace this year to continue to add to these numbers.

In addition to the pandemic, parts of Northeast Iowa were hit this past summer with a *derecho*. That was a new word for my vocabulary—a line of intense, widespread and fast-moving windstorms that move a great distance characterized by damaging winds. While our immediate area did not experience any damage, our neighbors as close as 57 kilometers away experienced complete devastation, similar to a hurricane. Houses were damaged or completely destroyed, farmland and crops were wiped out, the power was out in some spots for weeks. Again, our parish, with the leadership of the social justice committee responded by providing over \$1,200 in direct aid and helped to support meals at a community picnic.

Even amidst a pandemic, we must still respond to our call to reach out to our sisters and brothers in need. We adapted to planning our events online via video conferencing, but we also had to change the way we did our work. In the past, when we hosted and prepared meals, we would do that on-site, on-location at the church or the shelter. With COVID-19 restrictions, we had to modify the way we prepared our meals. Generally, we had a smaller group of volunteers prepare “bagged” meals to go. Keeping socially distant and wearing masks, our team prepared sandwiches or other easy to carry meals in our parish hall and then transported them to the distribution site. Gone were the days of being able to invite 100+ people into the hall so we could spend face-to-face time with them and visit. We were relegated to passing the prepared bagged meals in to-go containers through a door or open window and wish folks a good evening in more of a “speedy” fashion. With the shelters, we simply dropped off the prepared food as we were unable to serve and visit with those receiving the meals. The personal touch is simply non-existent during these COVID-19 days. Yet, people got to eat and they seemed to know the meals were provided with love from people who care.

The pandemic posed many challenges to various parish ministries. Our social justice committee remains committed to serving people in need. We became flexible and adaptable in our planning processes and found ways to still reach out to people and help them as best we could. In addition to COVID-19 and derecho relief, we still collected over \$13,000 to support our parish's missions in India and Tanzania and disbursed over \$7,000 to organizations who care for and provide services to the homeless, abused, those with developmental disabilities, immigrants, the youth and elderly. We continue with our ministry as we begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel related to this pandemic. May God continue to bless our efforts so that those we serve may receive assistance and know that God is present to them in the faces of those who serve them.

Besides my ministries at my parish, my fulltime ministry is as the National Vocation Director for the Divine Word Missionaries in the USA. We have a tri-province vocation office and a team of six vocation directors—five Divine Word Missionary priests and myself who work fulltime year-round to promote religious vocations for our Society in the USA, Canada and the Caribbean. Our office is located at our college seminary, Divine Word College, in Epworth, Iowa (about a four-hour car ride from Chicago). COVID-19 also upended vocation ministry in 2020 in many ways.

Foremost, our travel was severely curtailed. Collectively, our team travels around 200,000 miles by car and by plane each year for our ministry. Since we were totally “grounded” for several months this year, we will complete a fraction of those miles. Less travel means we attended fewer vocation promotion events, visited fewer men as we helped them discern; and in the end, we have fewer candidates entering formation for our Society here in the USA. In fact, most vocation promotion events were canceled this past year due to all the COVID-19 restrictions, thus traveling to them became a moot point.

But as an old proverb says, *necessity is the mother of invention*. With our travel restricted, our vocation team discovered new ways to spend our

time promoting vocations and educating inquirers about our congregation and the missionary work of our nearly 6,000 brothers and priests who minister in over 80 countries around the world.

We primarily took to social media and began to engage more with our Facebook followers through online content via livestream and pre-recorded videos. With a simple prayer starting on March 25, 2020, our office collaborated with the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters to produce 38 weekly programs on Facebook to engage our young inquirers and friends at large. We had never before utilized Facebook in such a way. Much of our previous content on Facebook was “static” posts that welcomed comments, but this new effort sought to engage viewers in “real time” and provide information to discernment that was relevant and helpful—we did not shy away from a realistic look a religious life, formation and current events.

Our Facebook programs required our team to come out of comfort zones a bit, with each of us sharing some of the responsibilities of planning and hosting the programs. We all stretched in our use of technology and tried new things. With limited budget and equipment, we did the best we could to provide programs that were informative and engaging. From open forums with simple question and answer formats to prayer services, programs focused on missionary ministry and aspects of formation. Our team offered content helpful to men and women in discernment as well as a glimpse into religious life and formation for anyone interested.

Planning our nearly 40 programs thus far was most challenging. As I said, we partnered with one of our sister communities, the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters. Together with several of their sisters and several of our priests and brothers, we promoted and informed our viewers about the Arnoldus Family (rightly named after our founder, St. Arnold Janssen, who also founded a third congregation—the Holy Spirit Sisters of Perpetual Adoration). While a few of our pre-recorded videos featured only a couple of people, most featured several voices located in many parts of the country. Utilizing Zoom and its recording feature, we were

able to include many voices in our conversations about religious life. The logistics of planning took on a life of its own sometimes as we prepared our topics, planned our presenters and orchestrated the programs. Sometimes it does take a village to pull off new and exciting programs.

As for the effectiveness of our Facebook outreach, we saw about a 24% increase in “likes” on our page from late March to mid-December. Our programs have averaged about 800 views per program with the least being about 400 views and the most being over 1,600 views. Needless to say, we are pleased with the reach of our programs and are happy to see several people return again and again each week.

This outside-the-box thinking was not only limited to Facebook. Since we traveled very little in the last nine months, we looked for ways to make ourselves present to others using a variety of platforms. Parishes began to plan online retreats for youth and they invited us to participate. College campus were also using virtual options for Busy Student Retreats and invited us to join the efforts. Some of our team members participated in radio interviews, Zoom discussions with youth, virtual discernment retreats and other online programs. While some of these options were available in the past, we underutilized them. As I said, necessity is the mother of invention and COVID-19 allowed us to begin to do things we never did before or begin to use alternate modes of outreach more effectively than we had in the past.

Interestingly, all the extra time in the office that came with less time on the road had another unexpected benefit. Our team was able to spend more time using an old technology called the telephone! What a benefit. In the past several years, we received many referrals from some of our advertising efforts. Many of these referrals are what I call “cold referrals,” meaning that the person did not contact us directly, but rather through a third party advertiser, such as a referral from a magazine or website advertisement. We struggled connecting with these cold referrals in the past—often calling and e-mailing a few times, but never making direct contact with most of them. However, during the last several

months, our efforts have almost doubled in our contacts with these cold referrals. Maybe people are at home more or are more willing to answer the telephone these days; or maybe it is our team members who have more time and patience to use the phone, but the end result has been very positive—more contacts with inquirers. This has allowed us to engage more men in discussion and help them in their discernment.

Overall, ministry during COVID-19 has been a mixed bag—some ups and some downs. At my parish, I discontinued my weekly Sunday ministries. I truly miss these opportunities to serve my faith community, but I am heartened that the work of our parish's social justice committee perseveres—that we continue to reach out to people in need. I am blessed to have the opportunity to minister with other volunteers and our parish faith community at large to be the eyes, the feet and the hands of Jesus during these uncertain times. In my role as the National Vocation Director with the Divine Word Missionaries, I am also blessed to work with a team of committed missionaries to adapt to today's challenges and needs and begin to use new platforms and try strategies in our vocation ministry of discernment. While we may have fewer men enter our formation program this year, together we worked as a team to be creative and support each other in new and exciting ways.

COVID-19 made its presence felt this year and people have been affected in a variety of ways. However, Church ministers around the world have adapted to new and creative ways of ministering to God's people. COVID-19 or no COVID-19, people need to know that the Kingdom is at hand. Women and men religious, ordained ministers and lay ecclesial ministers find ways to be beacons of hope and light in a world that desperately needs to see a shining star this Christmas Season that announces the birth of the Christ Child—Emmanuel—God with us.

Reflection on Pastoral Work during the Pandemic

Shen Shuangying¹
(China)

It was about time for the Chinese people to say goodbye to 2019 when the coronavirus hit the whole country. All of a sudden, the daily routine for most of Chinese was interrupted. As the number of people affected with or killed by the coronavirus increased sharply, people from northern China were thrown into panic. Restlessness filled the air. People who got affected were segregated from the public and those who were not able to come back home were asked to stay at wherever they might be. Because of lockdown, each family had to stay at their own house. Being dismissed

¹ Shen Shuangying, a religious sister from the Franciscan Missionarie Della Beata Assunta Pallotta, Diocese of Yuci, Shanxi Province, China. She graduated from Tongji Medical College of Wuhan in 1997 and earned her Master's degree in Psychology in Fordham University, USA in 2012. Currently, she is studying for doctorate degree in the Institute of Psychology of Chinese Academy of Sciences since 2019. In 2017, she was honored as outstanding psychological counselor in Hebei Province, China. Sr. Shen has had many working experiences, such as mental health coach in the Institute of Psychology of Chinese Academy of Sciences, member of Chinese Psychological Association, psychologist in DAYTOP International Drug Detoxification, and founder and general supervisor of Yage Psychological Counselling Service Center in Central Shanxi, China. Since 2005, Sr. Shen has been working as clinical psychologist. She is professional in healing those sickness related to medical-and-mental health, especially mental disorder such as anxiety and depression, etc. For now, she is promoting a project named "Psychological Service for Christian Faith and Spirituality" which aims to help Catholics to improve their husband-and-wife relationship, family life and parent-and-children relations, and family education for youth.

from schools, all children had to attend classes online. Thus, besides paying debts monthly to banks, there was another burden for parents. It was to tutor their children and helping them with their homework.

For Chinese Catholics, we did not have chance to go to the chapel and attend the celebration of the Holy Eucharist in person as before. I had to stay at home to pray and begin to miss those Sundays spent in our hometown chapel. I began to reflect on my personal relationship with the Lord. I deeply regretted those days in which I did not observe the Sabbath, those beautiful moments during Mass I did not cherish and those chances I missed to do charitable work. Fortunately, I was able to join an internet group where I met other Catholics and attend workshops. Through study and sharing, I was able to observe and come to conclusions about some problems which might be beneficial to our future parish pastoral work.

Living under one roof during the epidemic as long as one month or even longer, accordingly, a number problems emerged as time went by. The most common problems included:

- Emotional experiences of panic and fear;
- Anxiety, including moral anxiety, the constant feeling of being guilty and anxiety caused by concrete situation;
- Arising family problems under pandemic situation, such as conflicts between husband and wife, between parents and children, and among family members, etc.

In responding to the problems mentioned above, our present pastoral work needs a new dimension, which includes both psychological management and spiritual guidance. Without either of these two, the problem cannot be addressed effectively and thoroughly.

I would like to start with the experience shared by a man who went through fear and panic caused by the pandemic situation. In his own words, he related the emotional experience that he underwent when the pandemic took hold of the city of Wuhan where he lived:

I was born in the 1970s. I have gone safely through those years marked with natural disasters, such as SARS, the Wenchuan Earthquake, and so on. Yet, this time I felt death was so close that it could even be touched with hands. Then I was living in the city of Wuhan the center where the coronavirus broke out. When news of the lockdown had come out, fear and panic overwhelmed the whole city. It seemed that the world was going to an end. Citizens rushed into supermarkets to 'plunder' food. Within a short time, there was no more food left for sale in the city. What was worse, all hospitals were crammed with patients. Doctors and nurses had to work day and night without ceasing. Everything went crazy. My mind went numb, not knowing what I should or could do.

It was clear to me that the experience recounted by the man from Wuhan was not an uncommon one. As time went by, reports about the increasing number of confirmed patients and of those who died brought more intense panic day by day. Fear of death filled the air and seized people's heart, both Christians and non-Christians alike. According to the renowned psychologist Sigmund Freud, anxiety over death accompanies everyone from birth to death. This statement was confirmed by many internet group members who shared their experience with one another from time to time. Living in the tension caused by the pandemic, more and more Catholics become aware that their faith in God has only reached and stayed at the level of reason. Upon being surrounded by the serious pandemic situation, we became helpless and even doubted God's presence. Some people from the internet group quoted from the Holy Scripture and shared with other Catholics those passages about disaster and the end of the world. This intensified the atmosphere of panic even more among the people who believed that the calamity was somehow a sign of the apocalypse. In the face of this fear and anxiety, a certain group member commented online, "Everyone says heaven is a beautiful place, but no one has ever seen it. Nobody is sure about the future. Well, in a word, everyone prefers a painful life to a decent death because 'it's better to be a living dog than a dead lion'." I think it is because we do not have deep faith in God. Like knowledge in a certain field, our faith in the Lord only stays in our mind. From a psychologist's point of view, the root of anxiety over death is the

sense of insecurity. In Christian spirituality, one becomes anxious over death when he lacks faith in God. If a Christian can see God's compassion, the real purpose of creation, the true value of human life, man as God's image and masterpiece, and all creation are good in God's eyes, he can overcome the fear of death with inner peace and the sense of belonging to God. During the coronavirus outbreak, an internet group named "Mental Adjustment" was set up in our parish. In this group, people could share their feelings and get guidance provided by professionals. Initially I joined this group out of curiosity. So did others. Later on, group members began to focus on the fact that such a situation could turn out to be a chance to study the Word of God and to develop intimate relationship with God and family members. A certain member said that after listening to the sharing he began to develop the habit of prayer and practice acts of charity within his family. Gradually, his family began to change. Family members had become joyful, husband and wife relationship improved, and children advanced in studies. He felt grateful to a counselling center called Yage Psychological Counselling Center that had provided help to the group during the epidemic period.

Anxiety is a natural human emotional reaction to the present dangerous situation and an unknown future. A "current anxiety" is the reaction to a concrete situation and matter taking place in the present. A Christian's anxiety to a present situation may have moral effects. Many internet support group members shared that what worried them the most was whether they could make a good confession before their time came. Their conscience was burdened with the fear of being condemned to everlasting fire because they were unable to have a good confession. This mentality arises from our traditional Catholic upbringing which affects our perception of God. Many of us have been greatly influenced by our parents who impart to us an image of God as a harsh Judge. From a woman's point of view, anxiety is more emotional, especially for women who stay in the house during the epidemic. Pressure came not only from work and debts but also from taking care of children. Besides cooking food for the whole family, it is the women who usually are the ones helping their children with homework—which was not an easy

task. Furthermore, living in a limited space for a couple of days could easily cause unknown anxieties. Women tend to need more awareness about their emotional changes, ways to let out emotional feelings and adjustment to the changes. Online groups built for Catholics could help Catholic women to share and express their feelings with others. Later on, they could get advice from group supervisors.

Another psychological issue that was observed was the constant feeling of being guilty, in which a person perceives and treats himself or herself as unforgivable criminals because of the sins committed. People with such feelings may experience depression, disappointment and even despair. In psychology, it is believed that this sort of people usually have had a difficult childhood upbringing which contributed to forming their depressed personality. They have experienced more punishment than affirmation and encouragement in early childhood. From the viewpoint of spirituality, people with such personality tend to focus more on God's justice rather than His compassion. It is such a misunderstanding which brings restlessness in the human heart, especially under the recent pandemic situation. Some internet group members shared that they usually felt uneasy even after confession, thinking that they did not make a good confession.

In online groups, after analyzing one another's sharing with knowledge from psychology and spirituality, members have realized that mistakes could become chances to grow, and weaknesses could be opportunities to obtain God's grace. With the help from others and proper guidance and sympathy from the group supervisor, everyone in the group has learned that someone who might not have grown up in a happy family still could dream about what he wants to become in the future. Mistakes committed in the past would not hinder God's blessing but bring the human heart closer to God. It is possible for everyone to obtain salvation. There is no difference between the mistakes made by Peter or Judas. Both of them betrayed Jesus, one was in secret and the other publicly. Yet their fate was so different. Peter repented what he had done and returned to the Church. On the contrary, Judas died in despair by cutting himself out from God's

compassion and the Church. Thus, he brought ruin upon himself. The criminal crucified on the right side of Jesus was able to confess that Jesus is Messiah and enter the Paradise together with the Saviour. All the sins committed in his whole lifetime were washed away by the Blood of Jesus. In the same way, group members encouraged one another in imitating the life of Christ and sanctify their own life through prayers.

Beside personal emotional issues that arose out of the events related to the epidemic, there were also relationship problems, especially in the family. Because family members had to stay many days together in an enclosed space during the lockdown, there were greater opportunities for interpersonal conflict. In cases where there were already existing relationship problems, the conditions of the epidemic made them even more intense. Pre-epidemic, oftentimes, conflicts could be ignored or went unnoticed because everyone was too busy with their daily jobs and responsibilities. Yet when the epidemic brought everything to a standstill, issues began to surface.

Helping people to learn how to live harmoniously with one another in a family context in stressful time became a major part of the pastoral work. Children had to attend online classes while their parents had no choice but to play the role of “class teacher”. Far different from their own childhood experience, many parents were completely unprepared to tutor their children in homework. This reality was unfortunate because school teachers, during the epidemic, needed the collaboration of parents in order sustain their children’s education. Nevertheless, more often than not, the parents were unable to respond to the education system and knowledge experienced by many parents a decade ago are very different from what their children were experiencing in the present. As a result of not being able to deal with the problem in a positive manner, conflicts arose in the family, especially between parents and children.

In order to mitigate the problems brought about by the crisis, an online group named “Spiritual Integration for Charity in Special Time” was created in order to provide support for Christian families. This group

took advantage of all possible resources. For example, group members who were in the teaching profession volunteered their time to help those children who needed help in their studies. This support was a big help to those parents who were not capable of helping their children in completing homework assignments. In addition, all members of this group underwent studies on how to improve husband-and-wife relationship, family life and parent-and-children relations, etc. By exercising the “Five Ways of Love” which are the possible ways discussed and provided in the workshop, many couples have deepened their love for one another and found more things in common. Moreover, they have learned how to create a loving and healthy family atmosphere for their children.

It is true that our Church is one family. It is amazing to see that young Catholics, especially women, are active in online groups. It is really like a big family union. They could exchange their own experiences of raising up children, reflections on the Word of God, having service at church and how to improve relationship with other family members. Despite all the inconvenience caused by the pandemic, Catholics from northern China found their way to reach God and others. Nothing could hinder us from helping one another. It has added a new dimension to our present pastoral work in the parish. Even in difficult times, our pastoral work has to reach those in need in all possible ways. In God, there is always a way.

Reaching Out to Natural Disaster Victims Amid the Coronavirus Pandemic

Joseph Vo Cong Dung¹
(Vietnam)

In everyone's life, there is a time for everything, precisely as expressed by Qoheleth in the book of Ecclesiastes; and so, there are things to ingrain in memory, and things better to be forgotten. I was born into a very poor family in Central Vietnam during one of the country's most difficult periods. My father died early, leaving my mother to take care for six children on her own, with me being the only boy in the family. At that time, the poverty was so dire that it was a great challenge just to get food on the table for a family of seven. So the question of having a good education was something that none of us could dream of.

I managed to go to school until grade 9. After that, I stopped my education, and at age 15, I decided to leave home in order to find work in order to help the family with expenses. For the next two years, I worked various odd jobs in South Vietnam, but the money I could make was too little to be of help for the family. I decided to go back to my home village, applied for a passport and went to Thailand to make a living as an undocumented worker.

¹ Vo Cong Dung comes from Ha Tinh Province, Central Vietnam. Since 2006, he has been working as an undocumented migrant worker in Thailand, where he is also a long-time leader of one of the Vietnamese migrant Catholic groups in the Bangkok Archdiocese. In 2019, he co-founded a charity group called "Divine Mercy Charity Group" in order to reach out to unfortunate people in his hometown region. Until the pandemic broke out, he was traveling regularly back and forth between Vietnam and Thailand for his work.

In 2006, I arrived in a country with a completely different culture, lifestyle, food, and language from what I had been familiar with my entire life. After having made an effort to get acquainted with my new surroundings and the local language, I began to look for work. My first job was at a noodle shop, where I served food, washed the dishes, and cleaned the shop. I worked from 6 in the morning until 9 at night for a modest salary. One could not ask for much as a young, inexperienced, and undocumented foreign worker who could barely speak the local language. Even then, what I was receiving was still better than what I used to get working in Vietnam, so I found the motivation to persevere.

After more than a year at the noodle shop, gaining language and working skills, I decided to look for better employment, in which the work would not be as strenuous, but the pay would be better. Although there were better employment opportunities for those with Thai language skills and working experience, any work at that time would still be illegal since there was no agreement between Vietnam and Thailand to receive Vietnamese workers. I, and virtually all the other Vietnamese working in Thailand in manual labor, entered the country as tourists but instead looked for work. It is therefore not surprising that arrest and deportation was a common occurrence for many undocumented Vietnamese workers in Thailand, and I was no exception.

In 2008, a friend and I were deported back to Vietnam after being arrested by Thai police for working illegally in the Kingdom. Fortunately, we were not blacklisted, and managed to return to Thailand after a few months. I had since been working in Thailand in a relatively stable job, albeit still as an undocumented worker, until March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in Thailand, and was forced to go back to Vietnam in search for better haven.

March 2020 was the height of the first wave of the pandemic in Thailand where the country was forced to go into lockdown, with all non-essential businesses such as restaurants, bars, and beauty parlors having to shut their doors. Schools and places of religious worship were also forced to stop all

activities involving people congregating. For Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand, this meant that opportunities for work would be drastically reduced. Without work, it would be difficult to support one's living in the country, especially in the case if they were to contract the virus. The Thai government declared that foreigners in Thailand must bankroll their own treatment expenses if they became infected, which could possibly cost tens of thousands of dollars. This would be equal to many times what a person could make in Thailand in a year as an undocumented worker. As a result, many Vietnamese migrant workers (as well as those from other neighboring countries) decided to make the exodus back to Vietnam, where at that time, the pandemic situation was relatively less serious than in Thailand.

I was not among the people who rushed the immigration checkpoints because at that time I was still in Vietnam. Many Vietnamese, like myself, had returned to the country to celebrate the Lunar New Year known as Tết and had not returned to Thailand to work. Since the end of 2019, I had quit my long-time job working in a restaurant to become a freelance guide—bringing people from Vietnam to Thailand and back—and to start a transport service between Vietnam and Thailand. The reason I decided to change work was because the year previous to that, I and a group of friends had decided to establish an informal charity group in order to help the poor. We decided to call ourselves “Divine Mercy Charity Group,” which initially had 5 members. By 2019, the group had grown to nearly 45 members, and was becoming increasingly active. I felt that with my new work, my schedule would be more flexible, and I could engage in the charity work more actively.

When the pandemic heightened in Thailand in March 2020, causing migrant workers from Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos to return home in droves, I was in between trips and was still in Vietnam. Although not as serious as in many other countries, the COVID-19 pandemic threw a huge wrench in my career plans. Vietnam also went into lockdown because the Vietnamese government, having gone through the SARS epidemic in 2002, learned important lessons and was quick and decisive in its actions to stop widespread infection in the country. While this led to quick drop in the rate of infection, it was hard on the people economically. The fact

that Vietnam and all the neighboring Southeast Asian countries closed their borders indefinitely meant that no one could leave or enter another country in order to find work. Although, some did manage to do so illegally.

The pandemic severely impacted my livelihood because my work depended on the fact that Vietnamese people and goods would be going back and forth between Vietnam and Thailand. However, as the pandemic raged on globally, neither country opened its borders for fear of further outbreaks, and so there was nothing I could do to make a living. Not only myself, but others who worked in Thailand pre-pandemic were all left without employment. Finding work in Central Vietnam is already difficult even without the pandemic. Now coupled with the effects of COVID-19, the challenge is multiple times over.

Despite unable to work since March 2020, I have not been idle. With no gainful employment and more time on my hand, I devoted more effort to the Divine Mercy Charity group that I have helped to found. We sought out individuals and families in our province that needed help and tried our best to help them by fundraising, especially through social media. Most of the cases that received our help were those having severe illnesses that could not afford medical care without charitable assistance. The group has no source of income of its own, so any money we received was from donations either from individuals living in Vietnam or working overseas who know us and trust us with their small but helpful gifts. We are not a big, official or well-known group outside of our local area, so we depend basically on having direct connection with individuals. In this respect, however, the amount of money that we raise to help the poor can only be modest. Nevertheless, it was meaningful work and during the pandemic where difficulties were piled onto difficulties, this act of reaching out to the less fortunate became even more important and urgent.

My activities with the Divine Mercy Group accelerated dramatically in October, 2020 when a series of storms pummeled the central provinces of Vietnam, devastating the region with floods, landslides, and tremendous loss of lives and livelihood. Many families lost all of their crops. Others

lost livestock and property as animals drowned and household items were taken away by the torrents of water that rushed through the land. At the height of each storm, people in the affected region had to go up onto the roof of their homes to escape the rising water if they had not already evacuated to safer areas. The four provinces of Quang Tri, Quang Binh, Ha Tinh, and Nghe An were the most heavily hit by the storms as nature did not seem to pull its punches. I myself live in Ha Tinh province. Fortunately, my area did not receive a lot of damage. I could not say the same thing for areas that were only a short distance from my own village.

As I witnessed the tremendous loss and devastation taking place and the suffering that my fellow countrymen were having to endure, my conscience no longer allowed me to sit still. I decided to use my personal Facebook account to call for donations, especially from those who lived outside the affected region, to help the flood victims. With the money received, I bought various goods such as instant noodles, bottled water, and other dry goods to distribute to people in areas where the flood was so bad that they were isolated from any access to food and water. In order to reach these people, we had to go by boat because the roads had often turned into rivers. On some days when there were no goods to distribute, I joined rescue crews to search for individuals who might be stuck in their homes to save them from danger of drowning and starvation.

For several weeks straight, our Divine Mercy Charity Group went on daily rescue and outreach expeditions to help families and individuals in the various provinces devastated by one of the most violent storm seasons in Vietnam's recent memory. Although the people of Central Vietnam are certainly not strangers to annual storms, nature's punches on the region in 2020 was wreaking havoc in an especially catastrophic way.

As we made our ways into people's homes, many of which are simple and poorly built structures, signs of ongoing poverty in the region, searching for people to rescue and passing out things to sustain them through the storm, my body was filled with fatigue, but my heart was filled with a mix of both joy and sorrow. Going to the affected areas made me realize the

extent of the poverty that people had to face in their daily life, intensified with the COVID-19 pandemic, and now brought to its ultimate height with a short-lived but no less destructive natural disaster, especially for those who have lost everything in the flood torrents rushing through their fields and even their front yard.

Amid the sorrow of witnessing the degree of pain that my fellow countrymen were experiencing, I also felt the joy of being able to reach out to them with my meager portions of rice, fish sauce, and other things that would help them to make it through the most difficult days as they waited for the water to subside and decide how they would rebuild their lives, oftentimes seemingly from scratch. In my heart was also the joy of appreciating the irony that if it were not for the coronavirus pandemic forcing me to stay home most of the year, I would not have been able to participate in this act of mercy that would require more than just making use of social media, but to physically be present at the very place of suffering, to touch and hold those who are weak and in need of support. Indeed, in the midst of devastation of a natural disaster, people cannot be helped simply with social media and digital technology. They also need those who are willing to move out of cyberspace and towards that physical place of pain and suffering. The sense of joy I felt deep in my heart was the opportunity to be present with my own body in that very space, even though the effort was by no means easy.

Our effort to reach out to the flood victims received considerable support from people both inside and outside of Vietnam. One significant act of support came from Fr. Anthony Le Duc, SVD who is serving in Thailand. Fr. Anthony is well-known in the Vietnamese migrant community in Thailand, and was using his social media account to call for donations among the Vietnamese migrants there to alleviate the pains of the disaster victims. As I began my effort to help with the victims in the four provinces, I had consulted Fr. Anthony about my activities. As he learned about what I was doing and how I was carrying out my work, Fr. Anthony decided to entrust to me the amount of money that he had collected. We also decided that the money would be used to help those families that were

most affected by the flood, especially those who had lost family members, crops, livestock, and have suffered great damage to their homes. Because the money collected was paltry compared to the degree of suffering that the region was facing, we had to try to put the money that the migrant workers, who were confronting their own difficulties with the pandemic situation in Thailand, to the best possible use.

Having received the money from Fr. Anthony, I began to contact trusted individuals in the four provinces to locate cases that would benefit from our modest assistance. For the next fifteen days beginning on 2 November, I traveled to the four provinces in order to visit families and directly handed them the gift we had prepared for them to help rebuild their lives. Part of my work was not just to give money to people, but to give them emotional support, so it was important for me to visit the people in their homes. Many of the people I visited were elderly and bedridden, so it would not have been possible for them to travel to see me. It made better sense that I would go to visit them. Although at that time, the water had mostly receded, and I could travel by car, road conditions were far from convenient. In order to visit people in their homes, I would often have to go by motorbike or walk because either the road was too small for vehicles, or that it had been destroyed by the flood.

Visiting hundreds of families over four provinces in difficult traveling conditions those days certainly took a toll on me physically, even as a 33-year-old man in relatively good health. Nonetheless, as much as I felt fatigue physically while traveling, the feeling of tiredness would miraculously disappear when I entered into the home of the flood victims, meeting them, talking to them, and handing them the small gift that would hopefully help ease their pain and suffering. Indeed, the money is nowhere enough compared to their loss of livelihood; but I hoped what was lacking in terms of material value, could be enhanced with my physical presence and my desire to communicate with them my empathy, and God's mercy, which served as the spiritual basis for all that I was doing.

Ever since I was a small boy, I had always dreamed about being able to

do charity work, in order to share God's love with those who are poor and unfortunate. Having been born into and grown up in a poor family myself, I know what it is like to go without, to not have access to the barest necessities, to lack opportunities for education, and to sometimes feel like there is no net of support in times of trouble and calamity. I have experienced the pangs of hunger and the helplessness that come from destitution. However, my faith in God's love and mercy has always been the source of my hope and trust to help me survive difficult times.

Although life continues to be not easy, having spent all of my adult life as an undocumented worker in a foreign country, I recognize the gentle but sturdy hand of God in my life. With a wife and two small children, struggling to make ends meet through a pandemic that doesn't seem to want to end, there are still monumental challenges ahead for me as a husband and father. However, I have a deep conviction that I have also been called to be an instrument of God's mercy through the small things that I am able to do to help alleviate the pain and suffering of others.

The coronavirus pandemic that has caused disruptions to everything in the world and to so many things in my life, has ironically also enabled me to bring to realization in a dramatic way that vocational calling to imitate Jesus, the Ultimate Good Samaritan, who does not turn his eyes from those fallen on the roadside, but to come to the side of the victims with concrete acts of love, empathy and compassion. For me, Jesus will always be the merciful and good Samaritan. My simple desire is to be the one that stands at Jesus' side to help Him as He heals the sick and binds the wounds of the injured.

PART IV

THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES

Making Ways Out of No Way: Grace and Creativity in the Time of COVID-19

Stephen Bevans, SVD¹
(USA)

“God is faithful, and ... will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing ... he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.” St. Paul wrote these words to the Corinthians (1Cor 10:13) in a particular context, but they are powerfully relevant today in our own time of testing, the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. This time is indeed, one of “dark clouds over a closed world,” as Pope Francis describes it in the first chapter his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. Early last year, as the world began to realize the seriousness of the pandemic, everything changed, and nothing will be quite the same again. For months, as new cases and deaths have multiplied, economies have neared collapse, and racism has revealed itself as itself a worldwide pandemic, there has seemed to be no way forward, no way out.

But our God, as St. Paul assured us, makes ways out of no way. Or as Pope Francis has said on more than one occasion, our God is the “God of surprises.”²

¹ Stephen Bevans is a priest in the missionary congregation of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) and is Louis J. Luzbetak, SVD Professor of Mission and Culture, Emeritus at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, USA. He is the editor or author of over twenty books and has lectured and taught in many countries around the world. He is a member of the World Council of Churches’ Commission on World Mission and Evangelism.

² For example, in his morning meditation at the Casa Santa Marta, May 8, 2017, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2017/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20170508_god-of-surprises.html.

This truth is what these inspiring essays attest to and affirm. In the words of James McTavish in one of them, the “Holy Spirit squeezes out a creative response” from those who are open to her proddings, making sure that we may be able to endure this time of immense testing. The God of surprises, the Holy Spirit, has been active in this dark and closed world, enlisting the partnership of these wonderfully creative pastoral agents to bring strength and hope and certainly not a little joy to God’s suffering people in this time. They are no doubt a tiny sample of how the Spirit has been moving over the whole world, bringing rest, refreshment, and consolation, as we pray in the hymn *Veni Sancte Spiritus*.

This is indeed a time of testing, but it is important to affirm that it is not *God* who is doing the testing. It is important to affirm—in faith—that the human suffering of this pandemic is in *no way* God’s will. It is in *no way* some kind of convoluted divine plan that will ultimately be revealed as part of a “best of all possible worlds.” Above all, it is in *no way* a punishment that God has sent on account of human sinfulness. What this pandemic helps us see is how God really acts in God’s world: through the agency of women and men who are aligned to God’s purposes, who believe in God’s dream for creation. And when women and men are not so aligned with those purposes and that dream, they, the world, and all creation suffer as a consequence.

Theologian Elizabeth Johnson writes about how crucial it is to “speak rightly of God.” “The symbol of God functions,”³ she insists. The way we image God and express that image shapes not only the way we think, but how we act in our world. “Neither abstract in content nor neutral in its effect, speaking about God sums up, unifies, and expresses a faith community’s sense of ultimate mystery, the world view and expectation of order devolving from this, and the concomitant orientation of human life and devotion.”⁴ To truly make sense out of this pandemic, and appreciate the creative responses of the pastoral agents who tell their stories in these pages, we need to have an adequate understanding of God, and how God works in the world.

³ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 3-4.

⁴ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 4.

Most likely, the understanding of God that I'd like to present in this theological response is not the one that most or even any of the pastoral agents espouse explicitly in their reflections. But I think it might be one that they would respond to, and at least wrestle with seriously. What is noteworthy to me in reading their essays—I think it is true of every one of them—is that they do not offer simple or cheap theological solutions to the reason for the pandemic. They do not speak of it as God's will, or God's punishment, and neither do they suggest that more prayer or the right kind of prayer could lure God into bringing the pandemic to an end. Rather, they have simply gotten to work, open to the Spirit who "squeezes out a creative response," whether it is to offer kindness to a "woman in a hoody" (Sr. Sarita), or set up a suicide hotline (Dominic Thuan Quoc Nguyen), find ways to use the Internet (almost all of them), developing a Facebook hotline for undocumented workers (Maria Tien Phan), make phone call house visits (Anthony Liew), institute family catechesis (Minh Dinh), continue to engage in social justice advocacy (Len Uhal), or guiding homeless people with AIDS in mindfulness and meditation (Shiju Paul), or offering spiritual and psychological counseling in an online group (Sr. Shen Shuangying). Instinctively they have realized that if God is to work in the midst of this pandemic, they are called to be God's presence, the limbs and heart of the body of Christ, the dwelling place from which God's Spirit manifests herself.

The God of Christians is the God of freedom, creating for freedom, always acting in dialogue with creation's freedom, and moving the world toward freedom. The science of physics and biology have shown us that even the smallest particle of God's creation exists in freedom. Nothing is determined; everything is related, connected.⁵ Elizabeth Johnson writes, appealing to our imagination, that "it is as if at the Big Bang the Spirit gave the natural world a push saying, 'Go, have an adventure, see what you can become. And I will be with you every step of the way.'"⁶ Freedom to become, but

⁵ See Denis Edwards, *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 34; Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 155.

⁶ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 156.

accompaniment to persuade, to cajole, to woo toward fulfillment, even though creation sometimes takes paths away from what is best, especially human beings with free wills. It is not the manipulating monarch, Johnson suggests, but the vulnerable lover that is the paradigm.⁷ As William Cleary writes in a powerful prayer: “Your powers are limited, we know. What can you do? What love can do—no more, but no less either.”⁸ Speaking to the bishops of Mexico at the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in 2016, Pope Francis spoke of the power of God: “that which delights and attracts, that which humbles and overcomes, that which opens and unleashes is not the power of instruments and the force of law, but rather the omnipotent weakness of divine love ...”⁹

Because God creates in love and for freedom, God suffers. Early on in the pandemic, I wrote an essay entitled “Does God Love the Coronavirus?”¹⁰ and of course the answer to the question is yes. God loves every particle of the universe God created, and suffers when the various elements of creation collide in tragedy, as has happened in the case of the current pandemic. In this case, the fault of the collision may be of human making. Famous scientist (primatologist) and conservationist Jane Goodall traces a direct line between human disregard and treatment of nature and the global COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹ It’s possible, I think, that the virus has existed for perhaps billions of years undisturbed. Then human carelessness, attempts to suppress the truth, and lack of leadership unleashed it on the

⁷ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 159.

⁸ William Cleary, *We Side with the Morning: Daily Prayers to the God of Hope* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2009), prayer for January 28.

⁹ Pope Francis, Meeting with the Bishops of Mexico, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/february/documents/papa-francesco_20160213_messico-vescovi.html.

¹⁰ The essay will be published in Stephen B. Bevans and Clemens Sedmak, *Does God Love the Coronavirus? Friendship, Theology, and Hope in a Post-Covid World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021). Forthcoming.

¹¹ Joshua Barajas, “Why Jane Goodall says human disregard for nature led to the coronavirus pandemic,” <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/why-jane-goodall-says-human-disregard-for-nature-led-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic>.

entire world. God suffers to see creation go so much awry. And God not only suffers on account of human beings. God suffers with the whole of creation, even with the coronavirus as we humans try to eliminate it. God accompanies creation in its suffering, and in this way, by God's loving presence, redeems it.

The "icon" of this "redemptive co-suffering" with creation, writes Danish theologian Niels Gregersen, is Jesus' death on the cross.¹² Pope Benedict XVI points to the same truth. "God has suffered, and through his Son he suffers with us. This is the summit of his power, that he can suffer with us and for us. In this way he demonstrates the true divine power: he desired to suffer with us and for us. In our suffering we are never left alone. God, through his Son, suffered first, and he is close to our suffering."¹³ Benedict refers, of course, only to *human* suffering, but Gregersen and Johnson point out that God, in becoming not only *human* but also *flesh*, is made of the same stuff as all of creation, and so in Christ God suffers with and redeems all that exists.¹⁴ Pope John Paul II affirms the same: the incarnation "signifies the taking up into unity with God not only of human nature, but in this human nature, in a sense, of everything that is 'flesh': the whole of humanity, the entire visible and material world."¹⁵

But God does what love can do. No more, but no less. God's love not only accompanies creation in its suffering. It moves through creation with creative power, stirring up the creativity of women and men to cheer health workers as they return home from their shifts caring for

¹² Neils Gregersen, "The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40 (2001): 205.

¹³ Pope Benedict XVI, Homily at Aosta, July 24, 2009, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20090724_vespri-aosta.html.

¹⁴ Gregersen calls this "deep incarnation." See "The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World": 192-207; see Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 192-99.

¹⁵ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Dominum et Vivificantem*, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_18051986_dominum-et-vivificantem.html, 50.

patients with COVID-19, the creativity of Italians to sing from their balconies, and musicians in Brooklyn, New York to give concerts on their porches, the creativity of virtual choirs to come together to sing songs of comfort, courage for doctors, nurses, and orderlies to risk their own health day after day for the sake of others. God's love and creativity inspires scientists to work to find a vaccine that will protect people from the coronavirus. God's love inspired the inventors of the Internet, with all its negative aspects, and programs like Facebook, Zoom, and Teams. God's love inspires national leaders to tell people the truth, to urge them to wear masks, to keep distance from one another, to wash their hands frequently. God inspires pastoral workers like the ones in this volume to find ways of continuing liturgical services, make drive-by visits to "friends" in the SPRED program, to continue religious education in creative ways, to organize and fund the "Divine Mercy Charity Group," to be present virtually all over the world to offer formation for those entering religious life. I have called such actions "collateral grace"—traces of God's presence in the midst of the horror and suffering of the pandemic. They are ways that God is making ways out of no way, with our help, in partnership with God's beloved daughters and sons.¹⁶

In addition to stirring up forms of "collateral grace," the God in the Spirit is also active in offering forms of "tough grace"¹⁷—revelations that convict us of sin (see Jn 16:8). As Pope Francis said in his powerful homily on March 27, 2020, the storm that is the pandemic "exposes our vulnerabilities and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, or projects, our habits and priorities. It shows how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and communities. The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes people's souls; ... We deprive ourselves

¹⁶ See Bevens and Sedmak, *Does God Love the Coronavirus?* Forthcoming.

¹⁷ See Bevens and Sedmak, *Does God Love the Coronavirus?* Forthcoming.

of the antibodies we need to confront adversity.”¹⁸ The realization of the sins of inequitable health care, of food scarcity in so many countries, of continuing racism, of ecological devastation that the pandemic revealed, might, with the help of God’s “tough grace,” help us to “recover the shared passion to create a community of belonging and solidarity worthy of our time, our energy and our resources.” If we cannot do that, “the global illusion that misled us will collapse and leave many in the grip of anguish and emptiness.”¹⁹ Working to reveal the sins that in many ways caused the pandemic, and to alleviate these conditions, will surely be part of the work of the church’s mission when “the dark clouds over a closed world” recede to some extent and we can embrace each other, worship with each other, and visit each other once again. Let’s hope that the same creative responses to God’s promptings will guide our sisters and brothers in their pastoral work.

Anglican bishop and poet Graham Kings writes that “God is stranger than we know / stronger than we feel / weaker than we think / wider than we imagine.”²⁰ God remains Mystery. But a Mystery of love. A Mystery of Communion. A Mystery of abundance and creativity. A Mystery in which we play a vital part. God makes ways out of no way, but not by Godself. God works with and through the creativity of people like the pastoral agents in this book, and because of them and because of God’s grace we are able to endure the test of this horrible pandemic.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, Address during the Extraordinary Moment of Prayer, March 27, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_omelia-epidemia.html.

¹⁹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 36.

²⁰ Graham Kings, “Gethsemane and the Trinity,” *Nourishing Connections: Poems* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2020), 17.

Pastoral Creativity and Performative Theology: Responding to COVID-19

Gnana Patrick¹
(India)

I was happy to take a close look at this bouquet of narratives on pastoral creativity, drawn from Palm Island in the East to Chile in the West, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The bouquet is made of narrative flowers plucked from the garden of pastoral praxis, rooted in the religious, spiritual, psychological, social and economic contexts of the people at the grassroots. That the entries represent the pastoral ‘everyday-ness’ of the grassroots of the Catholic Church, in terms of their experiences of panic, pain, suffering, hope, joy, and faith in a manner of producing a phenomenology of pastoral creativity is singularly meaningful to me. The brevity of the narratives adds strength to their aesthetics, and allows space for variety and difference, which are the hallmarks of a bouquet.

When I finished reading this collection of narratives, what came uppermost in my mind was the performative dimension of theologizing. ‘How can the theological discourse be performative of the present-moment, freeing the present to open itself to the future’ is the bottom line question these entries endeavour to answer. Though synoptic and episodic, these entries open a window to peep into the reality of God the Divine Mystery which

¹ Fr. Gnana Patrick, Ph.D., Professor and Head of the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, India, holds a doctorate in Christian Studies. He has edited or authored many books and penned 88 research articles which are published in various national and international journals. Presently, he is a member of the Executive Committee of the Global Network for Public Theology.

surrounds us, in our day-to-day living, whether pandemic-hit or otherwise. The 22 entries under three parts entitled Parish Ministry, Teaching and Formation Ministry, and, Outreach Ministry mediate the Divine presence in their unique ways.

Can there be Theology after COVID-19?

‘Can there be theology after Auschwitz?’ – was a question posed by theologians of repute during the aftermath of the Nazi holocaust. ‘God-talk’ seemed meaningless when its prime performative spaces, i.e. the Churches, kept silent against the Nazi holocaust. Situation is not the same now. The human origin of the present-day pandemic is not clear yet, but, the question ‘can a merciful, loving and all-powerful God be silent against such a global pandemic which keeps victimising people – not merely the dead but the living as well?’ is emerging in the hearts of the believing people. So the question ‘can we theologize after COVID-19?’ Is ‘God-talk’ meaningful in such a pandemic situation?

The narratives of this volume are notable for answering this question, but in their own unique way. They are effective in making something absent, even while presencing the moments of pastoral creativity. That which is absent is nothing but the preoccupation with the ‘whence’ and ‘why’ of the pandemic, not the least the questions of theodicy! This ‘absencing’ itself is a creative moment of passing over the past, so as to engage with the present with hope. There could be various reasons why this ‘absencing’ speaks itself out in this collection – may be that the collection is consciously focussed upon ‘pastoral creativity’ and therefore not concerned with the past; or that there is a realization among the writers about the futility of speaking about the past; etc. Or more positively, as Maria Tien Phan, the writer from Thailand has ended her narrative ‘it is not why has this pandemic come, or ‘when shall we be relieved of this pandemic’, but ‘what can I do to others’ is the most relevant question, and it is not just a different question, but a different mindset that is necessary as she avers.

Significantly it is this ‘absencing’ which intones a theological response in me. It makes me walk past the classical questions of theodicy like ‘whether an omnipotent and omniscient God and evil can exist together’, ‘how could a loving and gracious God allow such a pandemic’, ‘how could the just God allow innocents to suffer’, ‘how to account for the meaningfulness of our very faith in a God and reconcile it to the situation of the present-day pandemic that seems to bring us to the brim’, etc. They have not appeared to be significant questions to the writers to address them explicitly. However, it is not to throw overboard the question in *toto*. They are addressed in a different mode – a mode of pastorally creative activities, with their own unique theological conversations. The creative initiatives, by themselves, are ‘statements’ in theology, their content the very activities themselves, their focus the engagement with the here and now, and their mode a hope-filled open-mindedness. They walk past the past, mediating and unfolding the disclosures of the Divine, the ever-coming God. They do so not by walking past the gripping reality of the present, but by precisely entering into the present reality with its vulnerability, ambiguity, uncertainty, but also with its potential. This is an act of being present to the present, with the creative potentials of faith and hope - the great virtues of Christian faith.

They approach the reality of God, the Divine Mystery, experientially; in that way, the ‘God-talk’ becomes never more relevant than now. ‘God-talk’ or theology is primarily of the ‘yet-to-be’ of the present, or the ever-opening moment of the present, and it is a discourse that mediates a futuristic hope in human lives. It is a mediation, which, though may sound at times to be lamenting over the past or the loss, is typically carrying the past into the present and the present into the future. Theologizing primarily is a hope-filling praxis of discourse, centring round God the Divine Mystery, transferring humanity to a possibility that is yet to emerge.

The ‘On-going Present’: Enestologically Speaking...

Classical theodicy in the Christian tradition has for long dwelt upon, as pointed out to by A. K. Anderson, on ‘protology’, ‘eschatology’, and ‘Christology’ – meaning questions of origin of evil, the ultimate end

point of evil and the redemptive role of Christ against evil. However, as he reflects in an article entitled, ‘From Zurich to Todtnaich’,² there is an ‘ongoing present’, which is in-between the origin and end, and during this time, human action inspired by God gets focussed – action which bears witness to the divine amidst us. Interpreting two poems by Paul Celan, which the latter wrote after meeting with Nelly Sachs and Martin Heidegger, wherein Celan ruminates over Sachs’ firm faith in God against the background of the Holocaust on the one hand and indignantly on Heidegger’s silence over Nazism on the other. Anderson reflects that classical theodicy is not able to answer questions implied in Celan’s indignation. However, new insights are manifest in the poem which disclose themselves that human agents here and now witness to divine presence through their actions against evil. By ‘protesting’ against evil, or resisting evil, humans find themselves experiencing the ‘divine compassion’, the divine grace in the here and now. In his own words:

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

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

² A. K. Anderson, “The Distance between Zurich and Todtnauberg,” in *Theodicy*, ed. Jill Graper Hernandez (Basel: MDPI, 2018), 40. doi: 10.3390/rel9010011 ISBN 978-3-03897-229-7 (PDF)

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

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

In the situation of the *pathos* of God he becomes a *homo sympathetica*. The divine *pathos* is reflected in man’s participation, his hopes and his prayers. Sympathy is the openness of a person

to the present of another. It has the structure of dialogue. In the *pathos* of God, man is filled with the spirit of God. He becomes the friend of God, feels sympathy with God and for God. He does not enter into a mystical union but into a sympathetic union with God. He is angry with God's wrath. He suffers with God's suffering. He loves with God's love. He hopes with God's hope. (271)

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

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

What is a loss of life? What is it like to go near the throes of death? What is it like to 'touch death with one's hands?', What is a loss of endearing relationship? What is a loss of human touch? What is a loss of freedom

of movement? What is it like to live with extremely limited means and livelihood? What is it like to bid farewell to the world as a lonely creature? What is it like to experience the warmth of dear ones through glass windows? What is it like to see and talk to dear ones virtually? – These are some of the questions which bring to our mind some of the rudiments of being human. One of the tangible ways of answering these questions in terms of faith in God is embarking upon pastorally creative activities, as far as the Christian faith is concerned, to feel the pulsations of life amidst the pandemic condition of life we are in.

It is not that every initiative brings forth the hope and power of God in a tangible manner. With all our endeavours to be present to the present and to the other in a situation of pandemic, we will also have to face up to moments uncertainty, confusions and acute suffering. Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others from the Protestant tradition have pointed out to an experience of the ‘hidden God’ or the ‘rearward parts of God’ during moments of suffering. According to Luther’s thesis 20, “... anyone who understands the visible rearward parts of God as observed in suffering and the cross does deserve to be called a theologian.”(203) As Alister McGrath paraphrases:

Luther’s language about the way in which God is disclosed through the cross takes the self-disclosure of God to Moses as paradigmatic: Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” And God said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you. . . . But you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” And the Lord continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen” (Exodus 33.18–23). (203)

And McGrath continues:

The theology of the cross depends on the human capacity to perceive – to observe what is happening, and reflect on its

deeper significance, even when this cannot be fully grasped. A “theology of the cross” thus gives priority to what is experienced. As Luther famously put it, “only experience makes a theologian.” The empirical observation of the cross takes precedence over theoretical speculation; otherwise, the cross is reified or translated into abstract ideas, losing its deep visual and symbolic power. (207)

Theological Droplets from the Bouquet

With the above-going theological vignettes, I ‘venture out’ to gather the performative theological droplets contained in the pastorally creative efforts narrated in this volume. I would like to gather them in the thematic baskets of ‘pain, panic and suffering’, ‘connectedness and community’, ‘hope and creativity’, and ‘faith and prayer’ which, though may remain overlapping, appear to me salient theological tropes of a phenomenology of pastoral creativity as presented in this bouquet. My gathering may not be exhaustive of all the theological insights contained in the bouquet, but only a few of them to give us a flavour of the ways performative theology engages the present moment of the pandemic condition.

Pain, Panic, Suffering...

Panic, pain and manifold suffering associated with the pandemic have made human lives – not only those dead but also the living, almost unbearable. They have, so to say, made an epochal dent upon the human flourishing on this planet. It is as if they have put the clock back by a period which is still expanding. The phenomenological experience of this epochal dent is multi-dimensional – psychological, social, economic, and spiritual. We see these multiple dimensions being narrated in this volume, with contextual examples. As Anthony Liew from Malaysia says, “The COVID-19 pandemic has been extremely challenging to face as it has widely affected the whole world—physically, economically, financially, mentally and even spiritually! (Anthony Liew, Malaysia). Patrick Carl Gunnacao from the Philippines points out the pain of isolation and loneliness, especially when one is infected with the virus. In his own words:

The experience of being infected with COVID-19 and having to be quarantined opened my eyes to what those who had been infected truly suffered from: ISOLATION and LONELINESS. Even after I was declared virus free, and was asymptomatic, people made efforts to avoid me. It felt like I was a leper shunned from the community and considered unclean. ... For many, being isolated in their own homes seemed to have a negative effect on their sense of belonging to a spiritual community and often resulted in anxiety and loneliness.

Shen from China speaks of the nearness of death as follows: “Yet, this time I felt death was so close that it could even be touched with hands. ... Upon being surrounded by the serious pandemic situation, we became helpless and even doubted God’s presence. Some people from the internet group quoted from the Holy Scripture and shared with other Catholics those passages about disaster and the end of the world. This intensified the atmosphere of panic even more among the people who believed that the calamity was somehow a sign of the apocalypse.” Shen brings to our awareness the unmeaning act of wounding people with their beliefs, which unfortunately thrives during this pandemic.

Connectedness and Community

It is inspiring to see several entries of the volume writing about re-establishing connectedness among not merely the members of a particular church but across churches and even across religions so as to communicate solace and solidarity to the victims. They do so as being inspired by a vision to re-establish a communion with God and people. A deep sense of solidarity, expressed through spiritual, psychological, and even socio-economic supports, emerges through the narratives.

For example, Patrick Carl Gunnacao from the Philippines speaks of the opportunity to restore our relationships with God and others: “We should remember that these lonely moments, these dark and seemingly cold moments, can be opportunities for us to feel God’s warm love and share that love to others; to reach out to people we have not talked to in a

while; to reach out and pray for the people we have hurt; and to help and comfort people who are suffering more during this pandemic.”

Shiju Paul from the USA speaks of his initiative to conduct ‘meditation practices’ as a way of nurturing ‘Christ consciousness’ among the participants to bring forth connection and communion with God and with oneself. He says, “I mostly use guided mindfulness and compassion meditation practices with the group. It deepens our sense of being in connection in the universe, with others and with ourselves in a loving way in order to become the fully realized persons we are meant to be. I call this fully realized state as our Christ Consciousness experienced in the present moment as connection and communion.”

Similarly, John Baptist Trinh Dinh Tuan from Chile speaks about serving as a bridge of love and communion so as to strengthen the people against the destructiveness of the virus: “We became a bridge of love and communion, connecting the flock with ourselves and the members of the church with one another, creating a strong bond that could resist the destructiveness presented by the coronavirus pandemic.”

Anthony Liew from Malaysia considers his parish, St. Michael’s Church (SMC), as a family in Christ and endeavours to keep the parishioners connected as members of one family. His parish reaches out in solidarity also to indigenous people living in remote villages. In his own words: “In order to continue the spirit of ‘SMC our Home’ during MCO (Movement Control Order), we strove to keep our SMC parishioners connected with our church and with one another, our one family in Christ.... During this period, our diocesan and parish’s existing *Sahabat Orang Asli* ministry, which does outreach work among the indigenous people of Malaysia (the *Orang Asli*) in the remote Orang Asli villages located within our diocese, managed to obtain permission and assistance from the state authorities to deliver food aid to some of the Orang Asli villages.”

Joseph R. Quane from the USA speaks about his ministry with SPRED (Special Development Ministry), which is a ministry for people with

Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD). He takes care to note that it is not only the people to whom we reach out who are helped but we ourselves are helped to grow in relationship with God and people through our interventions. He says, “When I began in SPRED, I thought I would only be helping our friends grow in their relationship with God. Little did I know that our friends would help me grow in my own relationship with God, and would also help me to better understand the feeling of belonging especially to a community.”

Similarly, Leo-Martin Ocampo from the Philippines tells us how the pandemic situation has taught him to trust in his students and appreciate their creativity more, contrary to the one-sided general habit of a teacher to undervalue the students’ skills and honesty. He says: “I learned how to trust in my students more, even when I could not see them and miss the feeling of being in charge and in control. Most of all, I could not help but be profoundly amazed by the creativity and enthusiasm of my students who are thankfully much more proficient than I am in the use of technology. Creativity, after all, is not one-sided.”

An inspiring way of experiencing God’s untold ways of meeting with us, ‘saying hello’ to us, so as to bless us is narrated by Sarita Kurikattil from Palm Island where she speaks about her pleasant surprise to accost a woman who met with her accidentally but was surprised to hear from her that the latter had been visited in prison by Kurikattil at an earlier date. She narrates: “‘You just visited me in prison.’ This experience for me was profound. I glimpsed how God works through us. This young woman had no need to remind me of where we met but her interaction with me has been a blessing beyond words.”

While approvingly narrating the diverse experiences of getting connected and becoming a community, we need also to note that sometimes our collective behaviour has not been encouraging. Len Uhal from the USA says that the ministry during the pandemic has been a ‘mixed bag’ – mixed with shortcomings as well as success stories. He was discouraged by the continuous callousness of church members in not following the safety

rules during worship services in the church. This makes him to leave his parish and attend services in another church. It's a discouraging experience indeed. However, that he is able to continue his ministry through the social justice committee of the parish is encouraging news.

Hope and Creativity

Hope, trust, inner security, and creativity are aspects very much narrated here, as they are germane to the general orientation of the volume. The particular instances reported in the entries add richness to the volume in terms of their singularity and uniqueness.

James Philip Monserate from the Philippines speaks it out with a punch to say that 'if we stop loving, stop giving life to others, and stop our creativity,' we could be worse off than the dead. In his own words: "We might not die of coronavirus, but once we stop loving and giving life to others, once we stop our creativity, once we stop compromising, trusting and seeing the capacity of others, we simply allow ourselves to fall victim to the idea that we are powerless and unequipped as members of the Church. In that sense, we might be worse than those dead individuals concealed in the tomb, lying in the empty ground." Thus he makes a point that it is our love and creativity which mark us out of the dead and gives the very grammar of being alive. And it is hope, as he continues, which helps us see the rainbow amidst the storm. In his words again: "The rainbow I was waiting was afoot, and that my little effort, the little voice that I threw before my laptop before my online and virtual students shared little droplets that did not emit the coronavirus, but rather emitted and emanated little particles of hope and inspiration."

The narratives highlight a 'positive contagion' contrary to the contagion of COVID-19. That contagion is nothing but hope, spreading fast along the channels of communication. It reaches out not only to perk up the spirit of the general populace, but especially the spirit of those who already suffer under different vulnerabilities. The entries by Joseph R. Quane and Shiju Paul, both from the USA, are cases in point. Quane speaks

about establishing connectedness with persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities which his organisation (SPRED) is involved in and Paul speaks about instilling hope among the victims of HIV/AIDS, who already find themselves in a state of victimhood. Quane says: “Many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have been living in isolation and some do not fully understand why they cannot leave the house or see their families or friends. My goal is to instil in our friends with disabilities a sense of connectedness and belonging during this pandemic with the hope of preventing them from feeling abandoned or neglected.” A hope of preventing isolation and restoring communion, which probably is the sole source of solace for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities, goes out from the initiatives of Quane.

Similarly, Paul’s initiative to reach out to HIV/AIDS victims endeavours, in spite of challenges, to prevent them from getting into states of anxiety, fear, depression and loss of hope. He narrates:

It turns out to be far more challenging when reaching out to religiously wounded people living in the social peripheries of our society. The coronavirus pandemic has inflicted these stigmatized landscapes and pastures even further. I regularly minister as a volunteer at a transitional living and recovery home in Chicago for individuals who have been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS and who are homeless or at-risk for homelessness. ... Meditation practice consists of a variety of techniques and paths that assist a person in undergoing a life transforming process when dealing with uncertainties. ... In this time of pandemic, the loop of ruminative thinking driven by fear, anger and sadness perpetuate the emotions of anxiety and stress. I offer this program as a prayer ministry with a people who sense a great sense of vulnerability and a whirlpool of challenging emotions. This helps them in their capacity for response-ability to ever changing situations rather than to react in fear to overwhelming scenarios of the pandemic. ... Their voices provide me the resources for the specific type of meditation to be used in the group on the given day. Every meditation session creates a field of awareness of our shared humanity in the midst of ongoing pandemic.

Migrant workers are the worst affected people during this pandemic. They are affected multiply – by the disease itself, loss of livelihood, absence of dear ones nearby to support, indifference even antipathy from neighbours, apathy of the support system, etc. How one responds to the situation of pandemic, especially when one is a migrant herself / himself is a question answered by two of the entries by Maria Tien Phan from Thailand and Joseph Vo Cong Dung from Vietnam. Though both are Vietnamese migrant workers, Vo goes back to Vietnam to be ‘physically’ with the victims of a disaster. Phan narrates her involvement in a ‘Facebook hotline’ project to serve Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand. Her fluency in Thai language comes in handy. She ends her narrative with an instructive note, as already mentioned above, our situation today needs “a mindset of asking ‘What can I do to help?’ rather than just asking ‘Why is this happening to me?’ or ‘When is this going to be over?’”

Joseph Vo Cong Dung narrates his own story of becoming a Vietnamese migrant worker in Thailand, but finally ends up with founding the Divine Mercy Charity group in Vietnam, serving the victims of natural disasters. He cautions us:

Indeed, in the midst of devastation of a natural disaster, people cannot be helped simply with social media and digital technology. They also need those who are willing to move out of cyberspace and towards that physical place of pain and suffering. The sense of joy I felt deep in my heart was the opportunity to be present with my own body in that very space, even though the effort was by no means easy. Nonetheless, as much as I felt fatigue physically while travelling, the feeling of tiredness would miraculously disappear when I entered into the home of the flood victims, meeting them, talking to them, and handing them the small gift that would hopefully help ease their pain and suffering.

The joy of reaching out to others with helps, even if they are small, is boundless. Needless to say God comes into us through such integrative

moments of the divine-human connectedness.

Pastoral creativity took different dimensions during the pandemic, for sure. But they also brought forth new ways of imagining of the traditional pastoral ministry. Faith-education, or catechesis, is one of the important traditional pastoral ministries, needless to say. But to make it online and that too as a *family catechesis* is something creative during this pandemic. It would do well to listen to Anh Minh Dinh from the USA, as to how it works:

The new approach that we applied to our online catechesis is called *family catechesis*. The program was originally introduced by the Loyola Press with a hope to encourage parents' accompaniment with their children in teaching catechism at home. The online classes meet on a weekly-basis. With modification, many sessions require both parents and children to be present and to review materials together. ... This approach requires intensive collaboration between parents and catechists and allows catechists to interact cordially with both parents and children. ... By being with us, besides their valuable presence, the parents can also suggest many creative and valuable ideas to the class. This is truly a gift to have the parents in the classroom with the catechists.

James McTavish from the Philippines points out that our future mission will have to seriously consider journeying to the digital continent too. He says, "If Christ asks us to 'go to all nations' an obvious place for mission is the so-called digital continent."

Faith and Prayer

When we go by the phenomenological narratives of faith in this volume, it may be said that it has increased in manifold ways and degrees during the pandemic. In spite of the fact that the traditional centres like church buildings, temple structures, mosques and other architectural sites which mediate faith, human beings have taken to practice of faith or religion,

especially through the cyberspace in a big way. Any quick virtual ethnography would attest to this fact. One of the central faith-related activities, shared by a majority of believers, had been ‘prayer’ – seeking prayer from others or praying for others or with others. Prayer as a mode of experiencing faith has increased manifold and it is an indication for the increase of or strengthening of faith during this pandemic.

Dominic Nguyen Quoc Thuan of Japan reflects: “It is when human life is truly fragile that human beings seem powerless in the face of the pandemic and imminent death, the only thing left is to place complete trust in God. In this event, the prayer of Jesus suddenly took (takes) on tremendous meaning: “Father, into Your hands I commit my Spirit” (Lk. 23:46; Ps. 31:6). Or as Tuan from Chile says, “What was most important for us in our accompaniment and communication to the flock, whether in deeds or in words was the encouragement for them to persist in faith and prayer so that they would find the courage to steadfastness to make it through these difficult times.”

Sarita Kurikattil from Palm Island finds prayer to be the greatest gift that we can give to each other during this pandemic times. She says:

Lockdown meant prayer was our greatest gift to each other, to our tiny Island home, to our nation and to our world. Our hearts sought deep communion with everyone and everything in the universe. ... I liken to being caught in a storm, a violent storm where we are tossed and turned, afraid and helpless but we are once again reminded to trust in our God who promises His presence is always with us whatever the strength of the storm. The intention of our community prayer is that we all be open to hear what the disciples heard from Jesus when they lived in fear in locked rooms, ‘Peace be with you.’

James McTavish from the Philippines testifies to the role of prayer as:

I feel it also essential to mention the vital role of prayer during this pandemic. In many moments I have found myself in need,

with various feelings in me to face, and external challenges to deal with. The general situation has been compounded by a quasi-lockdown in Manila since March, so it has meant spending months and months at home without going outside. Thank you, Lord, for the gift of prayer and community. ... It is a gift in prayer to be able to come as I am. The rhythm of prayer has been my salvation. To begin the day in the chapel with the Lord, spending time reflecting on the Word of God and dialoguing with Jesus. Also, the daily rosary, a moment to be with Mother Mary, and the importance of regular examination to keep an eye on the interior garden, and see how the fruits and flowers are growing, or not. In front of many situations where I was perplexed or confounded, the Lord was stable, faithful and firm. The rhythm of prayer meant I was able to live more situations in faith, ... To live in faith, to keep the faith, and in this way to continue to give life to the Body of Christ, pandemic or no pandemic.

A prayer, presented by Leo-Martin Ocampo from Philippines on the basis of Psalm 23, is indeed inspiring:

The Lord is my Teacher,
I shall not want.
He leads me to vibrant classes,
he refreshes my passion.
Even though I walk in the valley of online teaching
I fear no evil for you are with me.
Through my companions and students,
you motivate and guide me.
You prepare exciting innovations and challenges before me
in the sight of my doubt and complacency.
You anoint my head with inspiration,
my energy and creativity overflow.
Surely wisdom, knowledge and grace
shall follow me all the days of my teaching.
And I shall teach in the school of the Lord
for as long as He wills.

Implications for a Post-Pandemic World

One of the central changes that has occurred during the pandemic was for churches to go ‘virtual’, taking to the social media platform in a characteristically new way. Being well aware that this medium cannot replace the actual way of being a church, the entry into this platform has been diverse, creative, and to a considerable extent, been a ‘land from where there is no return’. The computer-mediated virtual world has become not a place of ‘captivity’, but a new home for the ecclesial inhabitants. Being a church has obtained a para-physicality, which generates its own pastoral dynamics and sensibilities, which are there to last long. This new home, greatly furnished during the pandemic, cannot be deserted in a post-pandemic condition of life. Pastorally speaking, this new home needs be joined harmoniously with our traditional home as we emerge out of the pandemic. The functions of a traditional church, some of which are earmarked broadly in this volume – being a parish community, faith-formation to newer generations, and getting involved in ‘outreach’ ministries to the needy – migrants, impoverished, and discriminated against, can well be continued meaningfully by occupying the new home of the church.

It is in place to reflect about the ‘sacramentality’ of the new home. Can the virtual experience of the sacraments be identical with the ‘actual physical’ experience of them? Certainly not! The first and foremost sacrament of the Lord’s Supper / Celebration of Eucharist can never be meaningfully limited to the virtual arena. The actual enactment of the Lord’s Supper in a physical ambience alone can substantively nourish the rudiments of our communitarian faith. So, we will nurture the expectation of coming back to this actual condition of celebration of the sacrament. However, celebrating it virtually, which most of our churches are doing now, is not to belittle the sacrament, nor to weaken its sacramental potential. It is virtually enacted, so as to quench our real spiritual thirst, and therefore the celebration is ‘newly real’ rather than ‘unreal’. There is an experience of divine grace channelled through the virtual medium, which needs be experienced in a new manner, and cannot be treated as a temporary arrangement which can be discarded later on. A newly real sacramentality is birthing itself during the pandemic,

and we open our hearts to the Spirit whose indwelling presence is extended to the virtual medium as well.

The entry by Indian Catholic priests Joshy Xavier and Lawrence Devin Noronha speak about the experience by people, especially by the migrant population, of divine grace flowing down through the social media. They say that “the people felt the presence of God, though in a limited manner and in a different way, but directly through a digital medium.” And they continue to add that “Most of the people who requested prayers were stranded labourers, labourers in transit, daily wage workers, and poor people from across the Hindi speaking belt and beyond. There were also people who sought counselling and others who just wanted to share about themselves.” Their reflection upon the way the Word of God works during this pandemic is appealing: “We see that during this adverse period of pain and isolation, the people hungered for the Word of God. The project was to collaborate with God in quenching their thirst for the Word of God.” The social media thus gets integrated with the pastoral ministry meaningfully. It takes us also beyond rigid walls. John Uhal from Iowa speaks of the possibilities of making people from nursing homes and jails too to attend our programmes virtually. That’s indeed a new and relevant possibility! As Napoleon James Raj says, “the challenges presented by the pandemic has actually equipped the Church with more tools to creatively and efficiently perform her pastoral activities with renewed enthusiasm in the new era which has already dawned during the pandemic.”

The argument of Shiju Paul is instructive too. He says: “The new normal will force us to revisit our pastoral paradigms. One of the challenges will be the task of addressing religious recession with declining church participation. It is also notable that an increasing number of people are finding time and space for spiritual connection through practices such as mindfulness meditations. Let us not resist stubbornly the new awakenings and invitations of the creative spirit swaying in the wind in the time of pandemic to enter into our impenetrable protective bubbles of pastoral security, ecclesial status quo and imperial images of Jesus.” We need to continuously open ourselves up to the workings of the creative spirit with us.

A Life of Simplicity

Among the many lessons for our life-styles, learning to lead a life of simplicity gains top priority. Lockdown and restrictions have created an ambience of life wherein living with fewer things, less consumerist goods, groceries, lesser transportation, etc. became comfortable, convenient and safe. We began to realize how the human spirit could manifest itself more congenially and creatively in an ambience of simplicity, markedly different from the ‘suffocation’ suffered in the ambience of plenty and especially with a ‘saturation’ of consumerist goods. As Martin Buber would ruminate, ‘living with consumerist goods would amount to living amidst ‘accumulation of dead cells’, suffocating the human spirit; and, a life with less ‘dead cells’ and more open space for something yet to come would open up the floodgates of creativity, allowing the more native potentials to flow out into the society. It would also allow the Spirit of God to blow where it wills, removing the hurdles placed by plenty and saturation. Furthermore, a life of simplicity would also be a fertile terrain for communitarian spirit to sprout because human selves would yearn for ‘living relationships’ rather than getting addicted to ‘dead cells’. God as a God of the living is a proclamation of Christian Faith, and a life of simplicity would be the best marker of experiencing this God of the living.

A Life of Humility

COVID-19 has taught us humility in more than one way. First of all, the kind of ‘arrogance’ exhibited among some sections of people who had developed a sense of ‘scientism’ to rule over their minds stands challenged radically. Science, a manner of pursuing knowledge, is sometimes taken, not so much by sincere scientists who take their pursuit to be an on-going journey, but by minds which tend to freeze the pursuit at the intersections of socio, economic, political and cultural benefits. Scientistically bloated minds get challenged and they learn a lesson in humility, while the sincerely seeking scientists endeavour tirelessly to respond to the pandemic. It is in this tireless response that God reveals

the healing grace to humanity today. It is a manner of engaging with the present, not enclosing it with past and futuristic preoccupations.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 situation has brought about a flux in standard roles and their performances. For example, in our ecclesial life, it has been the priest who had been presiding over our worship, and now the situation makes the family heads or someone who knows how to pray to 'preside' over our worship, and even break the word of God in our day-to-day life. To take yet another example, the standard teacher in a classroom situation had been wielding skewed power relationships with her/his pupils not merely in terms of mediation of knowledge, but also in terms of power associated with knowledge or associated with the progress of an individual through the formal system of education. The pandemic situation has deconstructed a 'standard teacher'. The teacher-taught binary has been jolted severely. A media-based visual, voice and figure becomes a teacher, without having much 'power' over the student, neither epistemologically nor systemically.

If we take a look at the history of Christian faith in Europe, we notice that the nature of the practice of Christian faith has changed significantly after pandemics. The experience of the Black Death during the fourteenth century is a case in point. We find there the emergence of the Mutterers/Hussite Movement which was a forerunner to the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The Hussite Movement transformed Christian faith into a pietistic form of faith, expected to be practised primarily by individuals rather than people as collectives/Churches. This individualising of Christian Faith blossomed further into a strong tradition when Martin Luther emphasised 'sola scriptura', 'sola fide' and 'sola gratia', stressing the priesthood of all believers, and arguing for the direct revelation of God to every believer. The post-Black Death epoch individualized Christian faith characteristically, and the circumstantial social, political, and cultural trends strengthened the process of individualization of the faith. If we go by this lesson to read the present-day pandemic of COVID-19, we can perceive an upcoming transformation of the manner of practising Christian faith, nay, any faith. The practice of Christian faith is in for a qualitatively

thorough change, especially due to the integration of the highly advanced communication technology.

The virtual media/internet-based communication has brought in a qualitatively different process of individualization of the practice of faith. It has distanced the practise of faith from an overwhelmingly physicality attached to it. By doing so, it has made the practise of faith ‘virtual’, which again is a complex process. ‘Virtual’ means ‘real, but not actual’. It is in this minute nuance that the new phase of practice of faith hinges upon. Virtual practise of faith is real, but not actual. It is both true and untrue, real and unreal. By taking to this virtual practise of faith, believers are embarking upon a journey of faith, which is both real and unreal. Phenomenologically speaking, it is a practise of faith, assorted with a huge quantity of cognitive content, whose character is expansive, diverse, and ambiguous. One can enter into a mentally informed phase of religious practise, which is primarily cognitive. This is not to deny the virtual rituals or ritual participation available in the cyberspace. However, when the ritual goes virtual, it is radically cognitive in that it depends on algorithms, which are ultimately mental products. Thus, the practise of faith has emphatically become a mental process, which goes with a process of individualization that can be ‘controlled’ only less and less by any institutions of faith.

Pastoral Creativity as Performative Theologies: By Way of Concluding...

As discussed in the first part of this article, the pastoral initiatives undertaken by different people – laity, nuns, deacons and priests become theologies in action, or in other words, performative theologies responding to the present moment in terms of activities. They become performative not only in their appearance and nature, but by the theological creativity of experiencing God in the present, which is ever-unfolding; by participating in the ‘situation of God’ today, the divine pathos, which inspires a ‘sympathy’, a c.o.m.m.u.n.i.o.n on the part of the human with God and the other, especially the suffering other. It needs a new mindset of faith to continue to collaborate with God to respond to the pandemic. The pastorally creative

efforts narrated here, in terms of ‘parish ministry’, ‘teaching and faith-formation ministry’, and ‘outreach ministry’ are some theological moments of such collaboration. I appreciate the editors, Frs. Anthony Le Duc, SVD, and John Mi Shen, for putting them together meaningfully.

Even as the pandemic is raging, I would like to end this piece of reflection with the following prayer from Psalm 44: 23-26

Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord?
Awake, do not cast us off forever!
Why do you hide your face?
Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?
For we sink down to the dust;
Our bodies cling to the ground.
Rise up, come to our help.
Redeem us *for the sake of your steadfast love.*

A Personal Response

John Mansford Prior, SVD¹
(Indonesia)

With the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, this is surely the first time that the whole of humanity has been invited to isolate from each other for an extended period of time. Everyone was urged to stop living in what we have always considered normal and to practise social distancing while awaiting an effective COVID-19 vaccine. And yet most of us were willing to observe the lockdown protocols for the sake of the common good, even though this proved to be expensive both personally and communally. This brought out both our vulnerability and our interdependence, themes that crop up throughout the Scriptures, though possibly not often focused upon until now.

The obligation to practise social distancing closed our churches. For three or more months there were no face-to-face Sunday Masses, and most routine pastoral activities were cancelled. Never before in history has the Church been so crippled. Before, we had lively Basic Christian

¹ Born in the United Kingdom (UK), John Mansford Prior is a member of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) who has been living in Indonesia since 1973. He obtained his PhD in intercultural theology from Birmingham University, UK (1987), since when he has been lecturing at St. Paul's Institute of Philosophy (STFK) Ledalero. John has been involved with the Evangelization and Interreligious Offices of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC-OE) since 1990. He has been active in the *International Association for Mission Studies* (IAMS) since 1996, and coordinator of the *Biblical Studies in Mission* (BISAM) Study Group of IAMS since 2004. Since 2010 John has been on the Board of the *International Association of Catholic Missiologists* (IACM). John is author of 170 articles and book chapters, editor or co-editor of over 40 volumes and author of seven books.

Communities and numerous organisations and movements in our parishes and dioceses. Then suddenly, without preparation, we began watching Mass online, and participating in prayer via our mobile phones or laptops, in whatever way appealed to us personally. How we prayed and worshiped online depended on our individual preference. This has brought out the heart of each individual's faith – not primarily regular church going but rather the nourishing of faith through personal prayer and Scripture reading.

This selection of 22 essays outlining experiences of COVID-19 come from each continent, mostly from Asia (12 essays), the others from North America (5) and Oceania (2), with a single essay each from South America, Europe, and Africa. These essays bring out clearly what a radical reframing of the Church has taken place. While a diocese is formally led by a bishop and a parish by an ordained priest, during lockdown each individual, family, or religious network decided how to put their faith into practice, decisions that seemingly continue after lockdown, becoming the “new normal”. Unsurprisingly, many became confused: How can we live-out our faith without regular participation in the Eucharist and the other sacraments? This emergency situation forced us, totally unexpectedly, to rethink how we live out our faith as members of the Church. And so, unintentionally the pandemic shook the authority of the Church's hierarchy. The bishops and clergy with their pastoral councils are no longer the sole leadership in the Church: individuals and networks have become more decisive. Not unsimilar, possibly, to networks of the faithful in Laos and mainland China.

The authors hail from the Philippines, Thailand, Viet Nam, India, and the United Kingdom, all but one where the Divine Word Missionaries (SVD) are active. We need to reflect on these experiences, for there is no turning back to the “old normal”. Everywhere it has become common practice for the faithful to pray the Mass online. Can we really attend Mass on hand phones, or laptops or TV? Surely we can, if we prepare ourselves and sincerely pray as we watch the online service. The essays show how the Mass and prayer online can be deeply spiritual experiences, while acknowledging that the celebration of the Eucharist requires more than just performing and viewing a liturgical act. We need to gather around the Table

of the Lord, sharing the bread and drinking from the same chalice.

These experiences of the pandemic invite us to think outside the “clerical box”, and to return to the time of the Apostolic Church, when the faithful gathered in people’s homes. Inspired by the practice of the Early Church, and of experiences of more recent persecutions, we can find new ways of being Church. These essays invite us to rethink the model of the Church that we have long accepted as being the norm, not just intellectually (reformulating our ecclesiology), but also visually and emotionally. This is truly the appropriate time to place trust in the *sensus fidei*, in the basic faith of the people, who are exploring ways of creatively being Church as we travel along unmarked roads, into an as yet unknown future.

If we are ready to acknowledge the Holy Spirit as a source of inspiration during this time of change, as made clear by the authors of these essays, then I think that imagination has a special role. One needs imagination to be empathetic, creative, and wise in order to be able to solve problems. Facing a Church that needs to be rebuilt in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic would be really hard if we were to lose the ability to think creatively. We must consider what is not familiar and give birth to something that we have never considered before.

Each of these essays points to a vibrant faith, for while the old normal has been shattered, we experience Emmanuel—God with us. God is the life-giver who not only constantly renews the face of the earth (Psalm 104), but also renews the face of the Church (Acts 2:17-21 & Joel 2:28-32). It does not make sense to go back to the old ways of being Church. Our pastoral outreach must reflect the creativity that is desperately needed by the people of God. Let us listen to our own experience of the pandemic in the light of these essays, so that like Abraham and Sarah we are ready to move forward and “*Go to that place that I will direct you to...*” (Genesis 12:1), that is, into the unknown that God is pointing to. Then we shall heed of the message of the risen Christ: “*Don’t be afraid!*” (Matthew 28:10). Let us keep growing creatively!

Principles of Ignatian Spirituality that Can Aid COVID-19 Response and Rebuilding

Christina Kheng¹
(Singapore)

Introduction

When Pope Francis established the Vatican COVID-19 Commission in 2020, he stressed that we do not simply prepare for the future but we *prepare the future*; that is, we pro-actively forge a new path ahead based on better values and ideals. The Pope emphasized that this needs to be a collaborative effort between Church and society, and indeed between all peoples in the world.² In Asia Pacific, the development of the pandemic has been diverse. Whilst some countries have managed to bring it under control, others are facing a worsening crisis. Moreover, there has been an onslaught of other challenges—natural disasters, military conflict, political upheaval, refugees, and extreme poverty. For those of us who work in the institutions and ministries of the Society of Jesus, the past year has challenged us to respond to the healthcare emergency and its associated effects such as disruptions to education, unemployment, inaccessibility

¹ Christina Kheng is a layperson based in Singapore and teaches pastoral leadership at the East Asian Pastoral Institute in Manila. (See <http://eapionline.org/>) She is also a Planning Consultant with the Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific. She has a PhD in Theology from the Australian Catholic University and a Masters in Public Administration from the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Her research focuses on theological methodologies in Church-society dialogue.

² See Pope Francis, *A Plan to Rise Up Again* (English translation). Original in Spanish, published by Vida Nueva, 17 April 2020.

to basic needs for the poor, mental stress on families, and limitations on religious activities. However on the positive side, it has also made us explore new avenues of mission and forge new collaborations.³ As I look back at our experience of the past year, I realize it was a graced time to live our spirituality more fully, and to even discover surprising new horizons of its potential. I can see with new eyes certain principles of Ignatian Spirituality that can be helpful in responding to this crisis and building back better. In the following sections I share some of our learning points, which I believe are relevant not only in Asia Pacific but elsewhere in the world as well.

Rediscovering the Roots

It can be said that the kernel of Ignatian Spirituality is found in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius (hereafter “Spex”).⁴ Essentially, Spex unfolds through a four-fold movement (or four “weeks”) overlaid with recurrent spiritual principles and ways of proceeding. Together they offer a powerful pedagogy of life. In each section below, as I discuss elements of Ignatian Spirituality in relation to COVID-19 response and rebuilding, I will also highlight their rootedness in Spex as well as their underlying philosophy, which is well born-out by the Catholic worldview found in the Church’s official teaching documents. I will then explore the universal potential of this worldview, and thereby suggest ways in which the Ignatian tradition can be adapted to a broader audience including non-Christians for the challenges of COVID-19.

Contemplation in Action

One of the first things we did in Asia Pacific during the early months of COVID-19 was to come together to reflect more deeply on what was happening, even while we were busy responding to the crisis. Some Jesuit communities and institutions were able to gather physically in small local

³ For some examples, see “COVID-19,” Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific website, <https://jcapsj.org/blog/tag/COVID-19/>.

⁴ See Louis J. Puhl, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1951).

groups. The rest of us who worked in international networks gathered online.⁵ Ignatian Spirituality advocates the disposition of being “contemplatives in action”. This implies maintaining a fruitful tension between interior attentiveness and exterior activity. It is ultimately aimed at helping people to become more aware of God’s presence in all things, to develop a sensitivity to God’s movement, and to direct their responses accordingly. Contemplation in action can be cultivated through regular practice of the *examen*—a prayerful reflection originating in Spex and further developed since then. Generally, it involves examining one’s actions, thoughts, and feelings, allowing oneself to notice the significant things, becoming aware of one’s orientations towards good and evil, and seeing how God has been moving in one’s experiences. Sometimes the reflection is extended to examining the community and surrounding circumstances. Whatever the case, the underlying principles include deep attentiveness to self, others, context, and events, and to the divine activity beyond the obvious. The importance of such reflection is underscored by the fact that Spex introduces the *examen* right at the start of the First Week and advocates its daily practice.

Being contemplatives in action is critical for responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. It helps us to avoid over-reacting impulsively to events, going down the wrong path, remaining unaware of ourselves and others, missing the deeper meaning of things, and not seeing what God is revealing. Despair, panic, and hopelessness could then result. For pastoral workers who have been busy responding to the pandemic, the habit of contemplation in action also helps them become more aware of themselves and avoid burn-out. Indeed without a reflective disposition, human learning and growth would be almost impossible. For this reason, even secular experts such as those in the leadership field stress the importance of reflection.⁶ Their underlying

⁵ For a description of one such significant meeting, see “How is COVID-19 Calling Us to Action?” *JCAP Newsletter*, August 27, 2020, <https://jcapsj.org/blog/2020/08/27/how-is-COVID-19-calling-us-to-action/>.

⁶For instance, Martin Linsky and Ron Heifetz exhort leaders to regularly “get on the balcony”. See Martin Linsky and Ron Heifetz, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), Chapter 3.

anthropology is one which regards the human person as an autonomous subject, capable of introspection, of pondering over events from a more objective perspective, and directing their actions accordingly. In this regard, being contemplatives in action also mean that we are called to make intentional choices. Ignatian spirituality highlights human freedom and authentic subjectivity. As underscored in Catholic teaching, human persons are called to take responsibility for their personal choices and actions, and to grow in their sense of identity, wisdom, and conscience.⁷ In the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been much superficiality and blind following of the media or the crowd. Hence responsible intentionality is an important quality to emphasize.

Overall, in line with the Catholic tradition, the underlying worldview espoused by Ignatian Spirituality is one that resonates with the philosophical stance of realism. This stance subscribes to absolute truths and deeper meanings beyond the immediate data of the senses. It contrasts with the philosophical stances of relativism and empiricism, which are evident today especially in the uncompromising assertion of individual freedoms and in the dominance of scientific logic. Realism also holds that humans are able to know absolute truths and deeper meanings. As asserted in GS 15,

humans judge rightly that by their intellect they surpass the material universe, for they share in the light of the divine mind ... they have always searched for more penetrating truths, and find them. For their intelligence is not confined to observable data alone, but can with genuine certitude attain to reality itself as knowable ... Steeped in wisdom, humans pass through visible realities to those which are unseen.

Being contemplatives in action is certainly a way to manifest this human capacity for insight. For people who do not profess the Catholic faith or

⁷ See especially paras. 15-16 in Vatican II Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1965) (hereafter “GS”). This pastoral constitution presents one of the most comprehensive views to-date of official Catholic anthropology.

other religious beliefs, the habit of Ignatian contemplation can still be encouraged. For instance, such people can be invited to set aside time for reflection, to note their consolations and desolations in the pandemic, to see themselves more honestly, and to ponder events more deeply by noticing the underlying forces of life and hope besides darkness and despair. Most of all, they can be encouraged to get in touch with their deepest desires and values, to discover what is truly essential, and to order their life and actions accordingly. In this way, they can navigate the experiences of the pandemic more wisely and meaningfully.

Appreciating the Grace of Vulnerability

In Asia Pacific, one of first fruits from our *examen* in the COVID-19 pandemic was a greater awareness of our human vulnerability. More significantly, we began to see it in new light, appreciating vulnerability not as something negative but as a precious grace. Human suffering and human limitations expose the myth of invincibility and help us to be more open, tolerant, and realistic. In many of our meetings, we started not with a discussion of solutions for the Church and society but with an honest sharing of how we each have been personally affected by the pandemic. Through such sharing, we got in touch with our own fears and anxieties, and also realized we were not alone. To re-phrase a line from a popular family movie, “our wounds are the cracks that let the light in.” Indeed, vulnerability re-kindles our need for God and for one another, and counters the Pelagian, self-sufficient, and over-confident attitudes often seen in our modern culture. It also helps us empathize with the suffering and disadvantaged people, and be more forgiving of others’ shortcomings.

In Ignatian Spirituality, it might be argued that vulnerability has been traditionally regarded with some ambivalence. On the one hand, humans’ weakness and God’s gratuitous mercy are the central themes of the First Week of Spex. Ignatian anthropology, in line with the Judeo-Christian tradition, acknowledges the fallenness of humankind. On the other hand, Ignatian Spirituality is one that traditionally favors valor and heroism,

and Spex speaks of vulnerability as a window for the evil one's attacks. Hence one could make a case that our newfound regard for vulnerability and its place in Ignatian Spirituality has been a renewed grace arising from the pandemic. It serves as a precious antidote to the over-confident humanism that underlies much of contemporary anthropology. This latter anthropology will no doubt reassert itself when the pandemic and its socio-economic impact start to show signs of improvement, or when technological progress bolster our misplaced over-confidence. As a counter-cultural witness, we can re-emphasize the dispositions of humility, inter-dependence, tolerance, and solidarity with the least. This makes us more willing to listen to one another, to learn from others, to forgive, to be accompanied, and to have open trust towards the divine saving presence.

Called to Mission through Discernment

Rooted in our vulnerability, we are then more ready for mission which is a theme emphasized in the Second Week of Spex. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us in Asia Pacific gathered online to discern how we should respond to the crisis. The principles of Ignatian Spirituality reminded us to be neither paralyzed by helplessness and indifference, nor jump impulsively into action without discernment. Instead, we endeavored to pay close attention to what was happening in the context, ensured that diverse viewpoints including those from experts and those closest to the ground were considered, and engaged in prayer and reflection. We also focused on gathering reliable data and analyzing them intelligently, while also noting how we were moved in our hearts during our reflections. The Second Week of Spex presents an image of a king who embarks on a dedicated labor for the world's good end and invites all people to collaborate in this noble enterprise. It also describes an image of the Trinity looking upon the world, noticing it deeply, being moved with compassion, and responding in concrete action through the Incarnation. This reflects a discerning way of proceeding which we are called to follow. In particular, a "long, loving look at the real" ensures that our responses are well-adapted to the persons, places, and times. It

also ensures that we do not remain passively in our comfort zone but take concrete steps forward out of love, however modest our resources and abilities. Just as important, it helps us see that the present challenges in Church and society are mirrored in our own areas for personal conversion.

In relation to this, we realized the need to have an appropriate set of lenses with which to view the context in Asia Pacific. Reading the signs of the times does not comprise merely following what is conveyed in popular media. There is much fake news and biased or disproportional reporting as typically seen in the over-emphasis on political and economic aspects of the pandemic. A proper set of lenses is one that helps us seek the appropriate information, ask the appropriate questions, and evaluate with the appropriate criteria. It stems from our guiding values, worldview, and particular charism. For instance, in the meetings among Jesuits and mission partners in Asia Pacific, we used the Society of Jesus's Universal Apostolic Preferences (UAPs) as our reference point. These UAPs are general orientations which the Jesuits have discerned for their mission over the next ten years.⁸ Hence we investigated the Asia Pacific context by enquiring how the pandemic has affected spirituality, the poor, the youth, and the environment—four main themes in the UAPs. At the same time, we sought to notice both joys and sorrows, lights and shadows, positives and negatives. Indeed discernment entails being mindful of God's presence in all situations even when it seems very dark. As a result, we noticed that although there has been much selfishness and exploitation in the way people responded to the pandemic, there have also been many acts of kindness and solidarity. Similarly, although the disruption of religious gatherings has impacted on engagement in church activities, many people are searching more deeply for spirituality and meaning as a result of the pandemic. As for the youth, COVID-19 has no doubt caused many difficulties on the socio-economic, educational, and mental health front. However, many young people are also exercising creativity, entrepreneurship, and activism for a better world. All these are valuable touchpoints by which we can build back better.

⁸ See "Universal Apostolic Preferences," Society of Jesus website, <https://www.jesuits.global/uap/>.

The call to mission in Ignatian Spirituality can resonate with a wide audience beyond the Christian community. For instance, the objectives of many international bodies, non-government agencies, and corporate responsibility movements are premised on a philosophy of humankind's vocation to serve the greater good. Contemporary literature on personal development also speak of living and working for a higher purpose beyond self. These resonate with the Church's teaching that "humans, created to God's image, received a mandate to subject to themselves the earth and all it contains, and to govern the world with justice and holiness" (GS 34). Moreover, the Catechism of the Catholic Church elaborates that "God grants God's creatures not only their existence, but also the dignity of acting on their own, of being causes and principles for each other, and thus of cooperating in the accomplishment of God's plan."⁹ This implies the need for discernment, which is also echoed in the growing calls within secular society for critical reflection and prudence so as to counter superficiality and fake news.

In the COVID-19 pandemic, all peoples can be exhorted to mission through discernment. For instance, they can be encouraged to get together in small local groups to reflect on what is happening in their surrounding context and how they could respond. This might help them get out of their own box of fear and self-concern while also noticing the situation of those more badly affected. Moved by the needs of others, they could then explore how they might contribute to the greater good, and take concrete action accordingly. Thus the cycle of despair and selfishness can be broken.

Synodality and Collaboration

A particularly valuable experience for us in Asia Pacific during the pandemic was the "Spiritual Conversations" we had with each other, whether physically or online. The practice of Spiritual Conversations has been revitalized recently in the Society of Jesus and is an indispensable tool

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2003), para. 306.

for communal discernment.¹⁰ Its underlying principle and method call for us to welcome and value the voice of each person, exercise attentive listening and intentional speaking, engage both head and heart, body and soul, and be sensitive to interior spiritual movements within ourselves and others. These in turn help us to better discern how God might be moving the group. During the pandemic, we discovered that Spiritual Conversations could still be effective even in online platforms. Through this practice, we could share our experiences sincerely, better understand one another, reflect on the signs of the times, and discern an appropriate response. This brought us closer together as a community.

At the same time, we were cognizant that our plans were at best tentative, and would need to be reviewed and revised along the way. Moreover, we saw the indispensability of collaboration in our actions. Such a participative, flexible, evolving, and communal way of proceeding manifests the synodality which the Church is called to demonstrate. Presently, the world is still struggling to collaborate fruitfully in dealing with the pandemic. We see much competition, discrimination, individualism, and division rather than mutual listening, dialogue, sharing, and collaboration. An underlying worldview that is essentially zero-sum threatens to prolong the crisis and cause the rebuilding to be unequal or even ineffective. To counter this, the notion of synodality can be promoted more widely. After all, being a pilgrim people on a common journey together as one human family is an ontological metaphor which Catholic theology applies to all humankind and not just to the Church.¹¹ Secular global efforts in co-operation through dialogue, such as those by the United Nations, are also premised on a similar philosophy.

¹⁰ For some descriptions about Spiritual Conversation, see “Video Guide: Spiritual Conversation,” Discerning Leadership website, <https://discerningleadership.org/blog/video-guide-spiritual-conversation/>; and “Discernment and Planning,” Essential Ignatian Resources website, <https://www.ignatianresources.org/home/discernment-in-common/discussion-and-provisional-decision>.

¹¹ This is re-emphasized recently in Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2020).

Hence in responding to the pandemic, a synodal way can be promoted even among non-Catholics. For instance, the method of Spiritual Conversation can be used by adapting it to a universal audience. This includes ensuring that a variety of persons are able to participate, encouraging participants to listen to one another deeply, inviting each one to share his or her viewpoints and feelings genuinely, taking time for silent reflection, and noting the movements of resonance, clarity, and energy in the group. These are ways in which the notion of “spiritual” can have a broader meaning. A key pre-disposition is to come to the conversation with a desire to listen and learn rather than to advance one’s own interests and viewpoints. In the long run, the regular practice of such dialogue can build communal trust and synergy, and counter the polarization that is seen in many societies.

Suffering and Hope

Ignatian Spirituality is not incognizant of suffering. In fact, this is a key theme in Week Three of Spex, which focuses on the passion and cross of Christ. Seeking the greater good often requires us to subsume our personal, institutional, and national agendas accordingly. However, acknowledging and accepting these costs of our chosen way help us to purify our discernment and strengthen our resolve. Suffering also comes in the form of doubt, confusion, uncertainty, and unexpected loss. Ignatian Spirituality invites us to remain with these tensions rather than escape them, and even to stay with the questions, with the pain, and with the apparent darkness so that God’s own light can come in at an appropriate time, perhaps transforming us in ways that we might never fully know. The Third Week of Spex proposes that we “consider how the divinity hides itself; for example, it could destroy its enemies and does not do so, but leaves the most sacred humanity to suffer so cruelly” (Spex 196). This could be called an “epistemology of darkness” that applies not only to Christians but to all human beings. As Pope Francis highlights, especially to young people,

prayerful discernment has to be born of an openness to listening – to the Lord and to others, and to reality itself, which always challenges us in new ways. Only if we are prepared to listen, do

we have the freedom to set aside our own partial or insufficient ideas ... In this way, we become truly open to accepting a call that can shatter our security, but lead us to a better life. It is not enough that everything be calm and peaceful. God may be offering us something more, but in our comfortable inadvertence, we do not recognize it.¹²

In Asia Pacific, we have also felt helpless in the face of people's sickness, poverty, displacement, and other forms of suffering. However we realized that accompanying them is perhaps not so much about solving their problems as it is about being with them and walking with them wherever they go, thus giving them the consolation that they are not alone. This certainly manifests the God who is Emmanuel, God-with-us. All these approaches to suffering can be of great help during the pandemic.

Complementing them is the important message of the Fourth Week of Spex, which is about hope. Ignatian Spirituality highlights that God's love is ultimately victorious, and that lasting peace and joy is truly the destiny of humankind. Not surprisingly, the word "hope" was among the most frequently mentioned at our meetings in Asia Pacific about the pandemic.

Divine Foundations

Finally the most foundational principle in Ignatian Spirituality is the primacy of God who lovingly creates, vivifies, and redeems all creation, and who is the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. This is the central point in Spex, which begins and ends with this reality and directs all its content towards it. The divine omnipresence is a reminder that whatever happens in the pandemic, God is present in all situations and constantly labors for the flourishing of the universe. At the same time, it calls for reverence for all creation, and particularly for the dignity of every human person. As highlighted in Catholic teaching,

¹² Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2019), 284, citing *Gaudete et Exsultate* (2018), para. 172.

nature as a whole not only manifests God but is also a locus of God's presence. The Spirit of life dwells in every living creature and calls us to enter into relationship with God ... Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things.¹³

This singular Divine Source is like a life-blood coursing through the veins of the universe, making it an organic, dynamic, and growing whole. On our part, we are called to align ourselves with this flow by ordering our choices towards God's greater glory, and for this end, to grow in interior freedom and spiritual discernment.

The primacy of a loving God gives us the confidence and motivation to persevere in the pandemic despite all the suffering and sinfulness. Although it is a tenet of the Christian faith, non-Christians can also share in its outlook. For instance, many people espouse a cosmology which acknowledges the existence of a transcendent lifeforce sustaining the whole universe. Major religions and indigenous spiritualities would align with this view. People with no formal religion might also conceive of an ultimate ground of all being. As highlighted by Bernard Lonergan, "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."¹⁴ In other words, there is an innate human quest for wholeness, fullness, and the absolute, and this indicates the existence of an originating primary source of wholeness, life, and truth. In similar fashion, Eckhart Tolle speaks of "an eternal, ever-present One Life beyond the myriad forms of life."¹⁵

¹³ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015), paras. 88, 233.

¹⁴ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 103, 101.

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

Likewise C. Otto Scharmer proposes the presence of an “originating source” of insight, inspiration, self, and will found within the depths of human interiority.¹⁶ These alternatives but similar perspectives shed light on how the notion of God can be made more universal and accessible.

With regard to spiritual discernment in particular, many people, including non-Christians, are able to go beyond a purely empiricist or rationalist epistemology and subscribe to more interior and affective ways of knowing. For instance, leadership authors Lee G. Bolman and Terence E. Deal highlight that “to summon spirit and care for the soul, we must relearn ancient lessons. There is truth beyond rationality. The bottom line is not the ultimate criterion. There is another dimension. Almost every organization touches this realm from time to time.”¹⁷ Although all these views do not equate exactly to the Holy Spirit inspiring the human consciousness, they nevertheless provide entry points by which people can be more open to the divine reality. Hence non-Christians can also be encouraged to wonder at the beauty or mystery of nature and the goodness in people around them. They can recollect with gratitude all the good gifts they have received in their lives and reflect on the very gift of life itself. They can then be invited to ponder a possible universal source of goodness and life. To cultivate spiritual discernment, people can be encouraged to notice the interior movements within themselves, and learn to distinguish those that are more life-giving from those that are more self-preserving. Their actions and choices can then be ordered accordingly. With proper accompaniment, such people can eventually be more open to recognizing and welcoming the divine presence which is always laboring for them.

Conclusion

As I look back at our collective experiences as communities, institutions, and networks of the Society of Jesus in Asia Pacific, I can see that the

¹⁶C. Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading From the Future as it Emerges* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009), 10.

¹⁷Lee G. Bolman and Terence E. Deal, *Leading with Soul: An Uncommon Journey of Spirit* (San Francisco: Jossey-Base, 2011), 146

pandemic has challenged but also brought out the best in our shared Ignatian Spirituality. Moreover, this spirituality has kept us alive in the storm more than we realized. It is a living tradition which our pandemic experience continues to shape, even as it stays true to its original roots. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor explores the causes and consequences of secularization in society and proposes new ways of “re-enchanting” the world.¹⁸ Perhaps it can be said that five centuries earlier, Ignatius was doing the same through Spex, helping ordinary people find their way back to God and thus live re-enchanted lives. The first UAP of the Society of Jesus is “to show the way to God through Ignatian Spirituality.” With a newfound common human experience of vulnerability, solidarity, sacrifice, and hope in the pandemic, Ignatian Spirituality can certainly be shared more widely especially through universally-adapted concepts, methods, and terms. This not only helps people cope better with the crisis but also emerge stronger in fullness of life.

¹⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).

Online Pastoral Presence: Virtual or Real?

Anthony Le Duc, SVD
(Thailand)

The COVID-19 pandemic that spanned the years 2019, 2020 and 2021 thus far has impacted every aspect of human life, including religious and spiritual life. The essays in this volume, which come from pastoral workers living in over a dozen countries around the world, confirm and elaborate on how particular ministries were disrupted due to the impact of the crisis. Although the social, economic and religious contexts as well as the extent of the pandemic in each locality differ, most of the essays have highlighted an important method to address the challenges presented by the pandemic, which the Church's leaders and theologians cannot ignore – the use of digital technology, especially internet platforms to implement or transmit many essential pastoral activities of the Church. What in pre-pandemic time was often considered to be a valuable means to supplement and enhance pastoral work became *the* primary means to conduct pastoral work and sustain the life of the Church during the pandemic.

A matter worth noting from the essays is that digital technology was employed to continue pastoral work because it was seen as a practical and necessary alternative under the circumstances rather than it having some theological significance that would redefine our understanding of God and our relationship with God and with one another. Indeed, one could not blame pastoral workers for not reflecting extensively on the meaning and implications of the use of digital technology to sustain their work. Perhaps for many, it was enough under the dire circumstances that the Word was preached, souls were nourished, and catechism was

taught. It was certainly better than having a total religious blackout with pastoral workers and those whom they served completely cut off from one another due to the invisible coronavirus. The deeper short-term and long-term ramifications involving the permeating of digital technology in the spiritual life of the people in an unprecedented way will have to be left to theologians and church scholars to investigate and judge as to their appropriateness in the life of the Church and its members.

I am not a theologian by training so I do not dare to draw any theological conclusions based on the real-world experiences recounted in the essays. I, however, would like to react to a particular reference that appears a number of times in the writings – that of the online events and activities as something “virtual”. Many of the essays point out how the pandemic forced church doors to be closed, activities cancelled, and liturgical services taken online either as pre-recorded videos or as live broadcasts. Some refer to these online activities as “virtual” celebrations because although they were actual celebrations, the primary purpose was to serve those unable to be physically present at the place of the liturgical action, and instead “participated” online. For Catholics, watching Mass online even in real time streaming would not satisfy the obligation of attending the Sunday Eucharist (even though the obligation was already widely dispensed due to the pandemic). The application of the term “virtual” to these online activities suggests an attempt to delineate between two realities – “Physical Presence” versus “Non-physical Presence,” whereby the former is often judged to be more “genuine” and “authentic” while the latter is deemed as “less-than-real” or merely a “simulation” of what is real. Bishop Broderick Pabillo of Manila diocese in the Philippines certainly is of the view that online Masses are less-than-real when he commented in one of his homilies that “our celebration with God and our relationship with Him is something that is real, actual and cannot be reduced to virtual. We all long to go back to participate in the Mass in a church. Virtual is not enough, we want the real thing” (Macairan, 2020). This understanding holds import on the nature and value of online presence by the church and its leaders in the digital age. What on the surface appears to be a semantic issue holds significant ramifications for

how the church and its leaders perceive the need for and value of the engagement with the faithful in the online arena.

“Virtual” vs. “Real”

The usage of the term “virtual” to refer to online events can be confusing because there is a variety of usages attached to this term. For example, virtual or virtual reality can refer to the use of 3D real-time interactive graphics and technological devices to create an interactive, explorable and immersive simulation of physical reality. The use of virtual reality technology creates a “virtual presence,” where the user perceptually feels that he/she is sharing the same experience with other people in a common location. This experience, however, is not identical to that of engaging in an online event where the individual continues to feel grounded in his/her physical reality instead of being transported to the location where the online event is taken place with the help of reality augmenting technological devices. Therefore, the experience of hosting or following programs online is not an experience of virtual reality in the strict, technological sense of the word.

Another understanding of the term “virtual” is provided by Merriam-Webster online dictionary. Here, it simply means “being on or simulated on a computer or computer network.” This definition seems most closely related to how many of the authors employed the term in their essays, referring to various activities and programs conducted specifically for a physically removed online audience. Unfortunately, the inclusion of the term “simulated” in the above definition and another definition of virtual as “being such in essence or effect though not formally recognized or admitted” by the same dictionary creates the impression of something taking place virtually as being unreal, unsubstantial, and inauthentic.

How then should we perceive the online presence as depicted by the pastoral workers and authors of the essays in this book? The various activities mentioned by the authors – Mass, catechism classes, meditation

sessions, check-ins, and so on – could be generalized as communicative actions by the pastoral workers with the people with whom they serve. Communication as a process is an ongoing dialogic relation between two or more persons exchanging signs for a common meaning and understanding (Eilers, 1994, p. 24). This goal of communication is realized by employing physical gestures, verbal expressions, written words, or a combination of these things. Moreover, oftentimes these modes of communication are facilitated by technological devices such as the telephone, television, computer tablets, video chatting applications, and so on. If it were not for a speech synthesizer and a platform called SwiftKey, the physicist Stephen Hawking would not be able to “verbally” communicate with others.

In context of the church and pastoral work, communication not only aims at achieving interpersonal understanding and collaboration, but also aims to promote communion on multiple levels – between individuals, within the Church, among peoples and nations, and especially, between humanity and God. The basic criteria that the Church has always set forth to evaluate a particular communication instrument is its ability to contribute to this noble goal of communion. As the document *Communio et Progressio* affirms, technical inventions that foster communication among human beings “serve to build new relationships and to fashion a new language which permits men to know themselves better and to understand one another more easily. By this, men are led to a mutual understanding and shared ambition. And this, in turn, inclines them to justice and peace, to good will and active charity, to mutual help, to love and, in the end, to communion” (C&P, 12). Digital technology, therefore, must also be examined and evaluated within these aims stated by the Church.

The goal of achieving communion in the Church and beyond is not new and has been a priority from the Church’s earliest days when the local churches were separated by vast distances and challenged by internal conflicts as well as persecution from the non-Christian majority. Church leaders such as Peter, Paul, John and James all wrote letters to communities

under their care addressing pastoral, social and theological issues that threatened communion and perhaps the very existence of the church. John Paul Heil (2011) notes that Paul's letters were often read when the liturgical assembly gathered so that all the members of the church could benefit from his teachings. Heil claims that these oral readings of Paul's letters even served "as substitutes for his personal presence, the letters of Paul make him present to his various audiences in and through his words of worship considered as ritual 'speech acts,' that is, words that actually do what they say, words that communicate by not only informing but performing" (p.3). Thus, despite Paul's physical absence, he was able to lead the people, "gathered as a liturgical assembly, in an act of worship that celebrates the significance of what God has done in raising Jesus from the dead" (p.41).

Although letter writing has retained its importance as a form of communication in the history of the Church, other forms of communication were employed as technology advanced. The invention of Gutenberg's printing press in the 15th century resulted in books and periodicals being one of the most consequential forms of communication in the last 500 years. It has led to the establishment and spread of new religions and inspired major revolutions. In the digital era which was ushered in during the last years of the previous century, digital technology has become an indispensable tool in human communication in general and the Church's social communication in particular. All three Popes of the Church who have witnessed the ever increasing incorporation of digital technology into human society, pointed out that this instrument of communication contains both risks and benefits. Nonetheless, in terms of its ability to contribute to the goal of communion, Pope John Paul II (2002) recognized that the "internet can offer magnificent opportunities for evangelization," while Pope Benedict XVI (2010) acknowledged the ability digital technology to "create deeper forms of relationship across greater distances." Pope Benedict XVI called on priests to "respond pastorally by putting the media ever more effectively at the service of the Word" and to be "present in the world of digital communications as faithful witnesses to the Gospel, exercising their proper role as leaders

of communities which increasingly express themselves with the different ‘voices’ provided by the digital marketplace.” Pope Francis not only demonstrates his acceptance of digital technology in words, but also in his own employment of various social media platforms in multiple languages in order to communicate with the worldwide flock.

Although employing digital technology as a tool of communication has become commonplace in the Church, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fact that many church leaders and pastoral workers were in fact quite inexperienced when it came to making their presence and communicating in cyberspace. One should note the difference between being broadcasted online while communicating to people sitting physically in front of you and communicating directly to an online audience which one may or may not see on the platform. In the former setting, the online audience is essentially eavesdropping or observing a communicative event, while in the latter, the online audience is *the* target receiver of the communicative act. The COVID-19 pandemic required pastoral leaders and workers in a very short time to adjust themselves to face a solitary camera and talk to people across gender, social, cultural, and geographical contexts in real-time, which they cannot physically see but know exist. For some pastoral workers, this was a particularly disconcerting experience.

The COVID-19 pandemic reminded pastoral workers making their presence online to take note that in the digital space that is sometimes labeled as “virtual”, there *is* embodiment in the sense that there are actual, physical, living and breathing *bodies* engaging in the dynamic act of communicating. In reality, not only are there real people populating cyberspace, they are doing real human things in this environment—sharing and arguing, buying and selling, causing conflicts and facilitating reconciliation, cursing and worshipping, sinning and searching for forgiveness. The things done in these digital spaces have real effects on their physical, spiritual and emotional well-being, and are not simply isolated to when they are online. Indeed, Pope Benedict XVI (2013) observed that “The digital environment is not a parallel or purely virtual world, but is part of the daily experience of many people, especially the young.” But it surely is not just the young

because as we can see in the COVID-19 pandemic, grandmas and grandpas in the rural countryside also learned how to use smartphones and access the internet. The experience of elderly Hindi speaking Catholics in the Diocese of Lucknow as recounted by Fr. Joshy Xavier SJ and Fr. Lawrence Devin Noronha confirms this new reality.

“Pastoral Creativity” during the Pandemic

On May 22, 2020 former President Donald Trump called on US state governors to open churches shuttered during the pandemic because they were deemed by the President to be essential. Despite the fact that pandemic at that time was still raging in many states, Trump said, “The governors need to do the right thing and allow these very important essential places of faith to open right now, this weekend. If they don’t do it, I will override the governors.” In response to President Trump’s comments, Father Edward Beck, a priest in the Passionist Congregation expressed in a CNN Op-ed that throughout the pandemic, he and other religious organizations never stopped providing “essential” services to the faithful. “During this pandemic I have buried the dead at cemeteries — with limited family members present. I have prayed with people via FaceTime and Zoom. I even heard a confession in a supermarket parking lot,” Fr. Beck writes (2020). Indeed, Church and pastoral leaders adapted to the situation and provided emotional and spiritual support for the people under their care by their presence online and, whenever possible, offline. Pastoral leaders did not disappear from sight simply because church doors were forced to close.

Similar to Fr. Beck, pastoral workers at various levels and in various ministries never “closed church.” The essays in this volume testify to the fact that pastoral workers continued to be present to those people with whom they serve through various means, most notably, through the use of digital technology. Indeed, from the perspective of the church and pastoral workers, there is no denial that the church is essential to people’s lives. However, caring for the people never ceased during the pandemic despite the closing of physical church buildings in numerous countries. Church continued to be church—pandemic or no pandemic. The present

understanding of church as a communion of the People of God emphasizes ways of being that promote relationship building and collegiality rather than physical grandeur and institutional prowess. The closing of church doors would not negatively impact communion if church leadership and presence continued to be demonstrated in creative ways both online and offline. The digital space where this presence is seen, heard and felt does not negate the fact that every action and word communicated was truly embodied by those on either end of the communicative act. It is not a “virtual” Mass when bread and wine were indeed turned into the Body and Blood of Christ. It cannot be a “virtual” Holy Hour when hearts were poured out in prayer and worship, and souls were spiritually nourished. In the dynamic and increasingly inextricable relationship between the digital and analog spaces, any presence that promotes communion and worship is valuable, authentic and real.

To affirm the communicative value and authenticity of the online communicative experience should not be interpreted as an argument for qualitative equivalence between the online and offline encounters, be it a liturgical event or some other activities. To return once again to the early church, one should not forget that despite Paul’s passionate letters to the Corinthians addressing the myriad problems in the community, not all of them were quickly resolved. Part of the problem solving and reconciliation process required that Paul make an in-person visit to the Corinthians “so that you might benefit twice” (NIV, 2 Cor. 1:15). In fact, before Paul made his visit to the community, he wrote letters paving the way so that once he arrived, the Corinthians would be more receptive of Paul and the things he had to say (2:1-3). Paul also demonstrated his desire for and recognition of the necessity to make personal visits to Christian churches and not to only communicate through letters in his letter to the Romans. Although at the time Paul wrote to the Romans, he had never been to Rome and was not responsible for establishing the church there, Paul expressed that “I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith” (Rom. 1:11-12).

The desire by Church leaders to establish strong ecclesial bonds through in-person visits was not exclusive to Paul. In the churches of John, the Elder who wrote the letter to the “Elect Lady” and her children also expressed his firm desire to discuss with her in person regarding various matters concerning the church. In the conclusion of the letter, the Elder writes, “I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete” (2 Jn. 12). Both Paul and the Elder in the Johannine church demonstrate that the in-person physical encounters not only are of greater grace to the faithful, but also fulfill the emotional and spiritual needs of the church leaders themselves. Ultimately, their experiences reflect the dynamics seen in the metaphorical presence of God among the Israelites in various forms as well as God’s use of generations of prophets to communicate with Israel prior to the Incarnation of God’s very Self in the person of Jesus Christ. The communicative value and effectiveness of the presence of God in the physical person of Christ far exceeded any other mediated forms of communication and accomplished infinitely more for God’s plan of redemption than if the Incarnation had not taken place.

In the present context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the qualitative difference between physical and online presence is being empirically proven by the fact that in Belgium, Catholics have been trying to gather 25,000 signatures to petition the government to not treat churches like restaurants and bars that must be shut down (see Nepolean James). It can also be seen in the tears of the people looking out from their homes as the Eucharist is processed down the city streets for them to adore and worship (see Patrick Gunnacao). It can be felt in the longing gaze that a person with developmental disabilities has looking out the window at the teacher who comes to visit but cannot come inside due to COVID-19 restrictions (see Joseph Quane). Indeed even presence mediated by digital technology can be authentic and real. However, that does not mean every mode of presence is equivalent to one another; and certainly, church theologians and thoughtful pastoral workers are often eager to make this distinction for the benefit of those whom they serve.

Conclusion

As Church leaders and pastoral workers responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and attempted to implement “pastoral creativity” by making their presence online, they must be reminded that they cannot both employ digital technology to communicate with the faithful, at the same time, dismissing the experience as “virtual,” “less-than-real” or “not fully genuine,” and therefore, not a priority. This attitude not only discredits and ignores the potential power of the medium being employed for the work of evangelization, but also devalues the very act of communication being carried out for the purpose of fostering ecclesial communion. It is also my hope that once the world has returned to some semblance of normalcy that pastoral workers who experimented with online platforms do not suddenly disappear from cyberspace, going away as abruptly as they appeared. If digital technology and cyberspace are recognized as the Popes have done to be “fruit of human ingenuity” that “must be placed at the service of the integral good of the individual and of the whole of humanity” (Pope Benedict XVI, 2011), then digital leadership and presence cannot simply be a temporary solution to sustain ministry while the pandemic was happening, but it must be incorporated thoughtfully into the church’s long-term pastoral agenda – post-pandemic. The pastoral experience from the COVID-19 pandemic informs us that building and improving communion within the church and beyond requires every means at our disposal, and church presence and leadership is needed in every context, may it be digital or analog.

References

- Beck, Edward (2020). Priest: Mr. President, we don't need to open churches to practice our faith. *CNN*. Retrieved from <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/22/opinions/churches-reopening-trump-COVID-19-beck/index.html>.
- Communio et Progressio* (1971). Retrieved from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_23051971_communio_en.html
- Eilers, Josef-Franz (2009). *Communicating in community: an introduction to social communication*. Manila, Philippines: Logos Publications, Inc.
- Heil, John Paul (2011). *The letters of Paul as rituals of worship*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books.
- Macairan, Evelyn (2020). Online masses not enough, bishop says. Retrieved from <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/06/15/2020955/online-masses-not-enough-bishop-says>
- Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/virtual>.
- Pope Benedict XVI (2011). World communications day message 2011. *The Holy See*. Retrieved from http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20110124_45th-world-communications-day.pdf.
- Pope Benedict XVI (2013). World communications day message 2013. *The Holy See*. Retrieved from http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20130124_47th-world-communications-day.html.
- Pope John Paul II (2002). World communications day message 2002. *The Holy See*. Retrieved from http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20020122_world-communications-day.html.

CONCLUSION

Moving Forward with Pastoral Creativity in the Post-Pandemic Church

Anthony Le Duc, SVD
John Mi Shen

The collection of 27 essays in this book serve as the chronicling of pastoral experiences during one of the most remarkable times in contemporary society as well as the attempt to reflect on these experiences theologically in order to draw meaning, nourishment, understanding, and consolation from the events that have impacted the world and the Church. The essays themselves are but snapshots in a much more complex panorama of events and developments that took place within the Church and around the world. While the experiences recounted in these essays, real and personal as they are, cannot represent the pastoral experiences of pastoral agents everywhere, what we have managed to do in this book is to include the voices of people of different cultures and gender to enrich and substantiate the bigger story of pastoral creativity during the coronavirus pandemic.

In this short final chapter, we would like to highlight a number of salient points that could be drawn from the essays of our respected contributors – both the pastoral leaders/workers/agents as well as the scholars who have dialogued with these real-world experiences in their responses. In addition to these salient points, we will also propose a number of suggestions relevant to the matters that have been brought up in this book.

Salient Points from Real-World Experiences of Pastoral Agents

1. *Pastoral agents of all capacities are “essential workers” in the Church.* The COVID-19 pandemic was an event that needed to involve every type of pastoral agent – ordained and lay, men and women. All had some role that they could play to continue the mission of the Church and to respond to new pastoral needs arising from this global calamity. The essays in this volume demonstrate that in order to sustain the life of the Church during the pandemic, the different segments of the Church had to continue to take their part. All were “essential workers” in their various capacities. And each person had to figure out how to play their part in the work of the Church in the face of very challenging circumstances.

Priests had to get used to speaking to a camera and empty pews in order to communicate God’s love and mercy to the faithful being scattered by the pandemic. Parish committees had to meet and plan activities via online conferencing platforms like Zoom. Catechists had to take their lessons online. Lay ministers had to deliver Holy Communion to the sick in disposable paper boxes. But their roles as essential workers in the Church never ceased. They simply had to figure out a different way to do what they had been doing previously all for the sake of building up the Body of Christ, which was being put under tremendous duress due to a global pandemic. John Uhal reflected this individual and collective effort in his essay: “I credit our generally positive response to a dedicated and creative paid and volunteer staff, an exceptional pastor, and a parishioner base willing to make and experience changes.”

Vo Cong Dung, a layman in his 30s affirmed in his essay, “I have a deep conviction that I have also been called to be an instrument of God’s mercy through the small things that I am able to do to help alleviate the pain and suffering of others.” Stephen Bevans in his response took note of the practical way and unhesitant attitude of all the pastoral agents: “What is noteworthy to me in reading their

essays—I think it is true of every one of them—is that they do not offer simple or cheap theological solutions to the reason for the pandemic. They do not speak of it as God’s will, or God’s punishment, and neither do they suggest that more prayer or the right kind of prayer could lure God into bringing the pandemic to an end. Rather, they have simply gotten to work.”

2. *Virtual spaces are real.* We cannot deny this reality when everywhere around the world, Church pastoral leaders and workers resorted to digital spaces in order to connect with their flock, to teach catechism, to provide counselling, to give blessings. In his theological response, Gnana Patrick concurred, “In spite of the fact that the traditional centres like church-buildings, temple-structures, mosques and other architectural sites which mediate faith, human beings have taken to practice of faith or religion, especially through the cyberspace in a big way. Any quick virtual ethnography would attest to this fact.” As a result, relationships were sustained, spiritual lives were nourished, and ecclesial communion did not disappear as a result of physical churches being shut down and in-person gatherings having to severely be curtailed. In the digital spaces made available by social media platforms and other information and communication technology, people congregated to pray together, to share their stories, and to receive comfort from one another.

Virtual spaces are real insofar as they facilitate human interaction and make concrete impact on our emotional, spiritual, and social lives. Indeed they are real because they have become an inextricable part of contemporary society and extremely significant part of the COVID-19 pandemic experience of pastoral leaders and workers around the world. To negate or deny the authenticity and the “realness” of virtual spaces is also to reject the integrity and value of the impact that the pastoral leaders and workers made in their pastoral outreach efforts. As Patrick asserts, “Being a church has obtained a para-physicality, which generates its own pastoral dynamics and sensibilities, which are there to last long. This new

home, greatly furnished during the pandemic, cannot be deserted in a post-pandemic condition of life.”

3. *A time to be active and contemplative.* The COVID-19 pandemic was a perfect reminder that pastoral work was both active and contemplative. For many pastoral workers, the pandemic was a time that affirmed to them the absolute need for moments of solitude, of down time, of doing nothing in order to pray, to spend time with God, and to reflect on their pastoral situation. In her essay, Sr. Sarita Kurikattil shared about the opportunity to contemplate various things during the pandemic. “The members of our small community found that the lockdown gave us unexpected gifts of time to read, time to reflect, time to contemplate, time to communicate and to feel connected, as never before, with the whole of humanity. There was no pressure to ‘do’ but much time to ‘be’. It could be compared to a sabbatical, a time to retreat with God with no urgent calls to attend to our ministries but an unhurried time to find solitude and silence.”

What many pastoral workers had the chance to do during the pandemic is in fact what they need to do at all times – with or without pandemic. Christina Kheng reminded us of Ignatian Spirituality advocating “contemplation in action,” which is about “maintaining a fruitful tension between interior attentiveness and exterior activity. It is ultimately aimed at helping people to become more aware of God’s presence in all things, to develop a sensitivity to God’s movement, and to direct their responses accordingly.” Kheng observed that “being contemplatives in action is critical for responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. It helps us to avoid over-reacting impulsively to events, going down the wrong path, remaining unaware of ourselves and others, missing the deeper meaning of things, and not seeing what God is revealing.” Unfortunately, for many pastoral workers, it took a pandemic for them to actually incorporate the contemplative part into their lives.

4. *Creativity is borne of necessity.* The old proverb that “necessity is the mother of invention” has once again been on display during the

pandemic. As a result of lockdowns, social distancing measures, and whole host of other restrictions on normal routines, pastoral workers had to resort to various means to carry out their pastoral work. But they did not do so simply relying on their own ingenuity. Fr. James McTavish commented that they collaborated with the Holy Spirit to squeeze out a creative pastoral response amid what was obviously not an easy situation.

Some managed to come up with new pastoral outreach programs in order to specifically respond to the needs arising for the pandemic. Many had to learn new skills and found ways to be resourceful. Catechists whose students were homebound due to the pandemic enlisted the help of parents so that the learning experience of the children would be more effective (Deacon Minh Dinh). Some like Fr. Tuan Trinh (Chile) had to take risks, celebrating online Mass in Spanish even though he was not yet fluent in the language. New online activities (Bible competition, Scripture translation projects, Guess the part of the church competition, etc.) were invented in order to engage the people at home and physically separated from one another.

The pastoral agents in these essays have all either directly or indirectly affirmed Fr. Shiju Paul's exhortation to "not resist stubbornly the new awakenings and invitations of the creative spirit swaying in the wind in the time of pandemic" in order to break away from pastoral security, stagnant ways of being Church, and outdated ways of bringing Christ to others. The pandemic was as much a crisis as it was an opportunity for pastoral explorations, ingenuity and courage in testing new grounds, trying new ministerial models and employing new means of communication. With different levels of success, the pastoral agents in this book have ventured into new pastoral territories and methods. The point is not so much that they were successful or not, but that they tried.

5. *God is always with us.* Whether through the activities of the Church or through individual prayers and contemplation, the pandemic affirmed that God did not cease to be with God's people. Through the priest

who celebrated Mass online for people to participate from the safety of their homes; through volunteers who manned telephone hotlines to counsel people in distress or administer websites providing helpful pandemic information for migrant workers; through meditation sessions via Zoom to help people find God deep within themselves; and through so many other different ways that pastoral leaders and workers communicated with God's people, it was confirmation that God did not abandon the world during the pandemic. In his response, John Prior observed, "Each of these essays points to a vibrant faith, for while the old normal has been shattered, we experience Emmanuel, God with us. God is the life-giver who not only constantly renews the face of the earth (Psalm 104), but also renews the face of the Church" (Acts 2:17-21 & Joel 2:28-32).

As Joseph Quane shared in his essay, "During the moment when I get to see our friends [with intellectual and development disabilities] react to seeing the group on Zoom or outside the window of their home, I am reminded that God is indeed with us. When I see the smile on their face and hear the excitement in their voices, I know that our bonds of friendship remain strong, and it is through those bonds of friendships that we can grow in our relationship with God." God is also with us in the suffering because God not only is willing to suffer on account of humanity, God also accompanies creation in its own suffering. In his response essay, Stephen Bevans writes, "God suffers with the whole of creation, even with the coronavirus as we humans try to eliminate it. God accompanies creation in its suffering, and in this way, by God's loving presence, redeems it." Indeed, the African Conference of Churches affirms:

Our theology must take seriously the fact that even with COVID-19, even when many people die and some are healed, the presence of Emmanuel, God with us, is assured. We may rather be praying for God's grace, to be able to "drink from the cup" if necessary without losing our faith. Even in death, we have a promise of resurrection, since:

“When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory”. (1 Cor. 15:54)¹

Suggestions for the Post-pandemic Church

As the world and the Church move on from the pandemic, there is no doubt that there are much to reflect upon and learn from the collective experience of humanity. In the context of the experiences presented in this book, we would like to suggest the following points for further discussion and reflection going forward:

1. *Post-pandemic processing and reflection.* It is common and necessary practice in any kind of work to process the things that have been done in order to discover valuable insights deriving from the experiences gained. In reality, we do not learn from the experiences as much as from reflecting on those experiences. Experiences that are gone unprocessed and not reflected upon offer little value in terms of giving us insights and lessons into what to do for the future. If our pastoral agents simply responded to the circumstances of the pandemic with various actions without taking the time during and after the crisis to process and reflect on the things that they did, insights would never be discovered, mistakes, if any, would be glossed over, and significant lessons that may help address future circumstances would be ignored. Of course, post-pandemic processing and reflection does not mean that no discernment took place beforehand. As Christina Kheng commented in her essay, one could use various methods, especially the Ignatian Method to contemplate in order to discern a proper response to the crisis, which “involves examining one’s actions, thoughts, and feelings, allowing oneself to notice the significant things, becoming aware of one’s

¹Ten Theological Theses on COVID-19 in Africa - All Africa Conference of Churches derived from https://www.globalministries.org/ten_theological_theses_on_covid_19_in_africa,

orientations towards good and evil, and seeing how God has been moving in one's experiences. Sometimes the reflection is extended to examining the community and surrounding circumstances. Whatever the case, the underlying principles include deep attentiveness to self, others, context, and events, and to the divine activity beyond the obvious." Nonetheless, while discernment during the pandemic focuses on the response to the circumstances that the pastoral agent has to confront, the post-pandemic processing looks for insights and lessons from these responses as valuable tools going forward. Thus the set of questions that the pastoral agent asks him/herself in this task would be different. Some of the questions might include:

- (1) How did the way I respond to the pastoral needs arising from the pandemic reflect on me as a pastoral worker?
- (2) What have I learned about myself and the people I served as a result of the events that took place?
- (3) What did I do well and where could I have done better?
- (4) Where was God in my pandemic experience and how did God reveal Godself to me through all that took place?
- (5) What changes can I make to improve the way I respond to various pastoral needs going forward?

2. *Deeper examination of theological implications of pastoral practices carried out during the pandemic for the post-pandemic Church.* The experiences of the pastoral agents in the essays reflect what took place pastorally all over the world. During the pandemic, there was an urgent need to provide spiritual nourishment for the flock and to sustain the life of the Church. As a result, many pastoral workers "scrambled" to do what they could in order to address the immediate needs. Some practices seen (as recounted in the experiences in this book as well as from other sources) included:

- (1) Online liturgies that were either livestreamed or pre-recorded for all or a specific group of people to view. Communion could only be received spiritually if the liturgy was a Mass.

- (2) Drive-in Masses where parishioners stayed in their cars in the church parking lot. Communion could be physically received in such a Mass.
- (3) Drive-through confessions in which priests hear confessions from parishioners in the parking lot. The faithful sit in their car appropriately distanced from the priest, who can wear a mask to cover his eyes in order to ensure anonymity for those who come for confession.
- (4) Church rooftop Eucharistic blessings in which the priest goes on the roof of the church, holding up the monstrance and blesses the people in the vicinity with the Blessed Sacrament.
- (5) Mobile messenger mediated blessings in which priests pray for and bless individuals via an application such as Facebook Messenger, LINE or Viber.
- (6) Online meditation sessions where the leader guided participants to meditate from the safety of their own homes.

As with any ingenuity, it is important to raise questions about the theological and spiritual implications of these pastoral actions. Reflecting on these questions could help to clarify, affirm, or challenge certain pastoral practices that took place during the pandemic. Moreover, they could help set the pastoral standards for future pastoral work of the post-pandemic Church. Some of the relevant questions include:

- (1) How does “online presence” fit into the vision presented by communion ecclesiology which is so important to the life of the modern Church?
- (2) In what ways is digitally mediated presence considered “embodied presence” and in what ways would it not be construed as “embodied presence”?
- (3) In what ways did certain practices that became normal during the pandemic faithful to or contrary to the incarnational theological framework so essential to Christian pastoral theology?
- (4) What pastoral and theological standards should govern the

work of pastoral workers in the digital milieu where pastoral opportunities are ever expanding both in the online and offline arenas?

- (5) How can the pastoral worker differentiate between timely pastoral innovation and potentially inappropriate pastoral actions when confronted with a new pastoral context?

In this process of asking questions, the thought of John Prior is instructive:

These experiences of the pandemic invite us to think outside the ‘clerical box’, and to return to the time of the Apostolic Church, when the faithful gathered in people’s homes. Inspired by the practice of the Early Church, and of experiences of more recent persecutions, we can find new ways of being Church. These essays invite us to rethink the model of the Church that we have long accepted as being the norm, not just intellectually (reformulating our ecclesiology), but also visually and emotionally. This is truly the appropriate time to place trust in the *sensus fidei*, in the basic faith of the people, who are exploring ways of creatively being Church as we travel along unmarked roads, into an as yet unknown future.

3. *Evaluating the level of ad intra and ad extra engagement by the Church during the pandemic.* The pandemic was a time in which not only members of the Church were isolated from one another, but there was also isolation between denominations and religions. Indeed, the conditions of the pandemic not only was an obstacle to ecclesial unity but also ecumenism and interreligious relations and engagement. The pandemic represented a time in which there was an infodemic characterized by a vast quantity of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation about all kinds of things having to do with the coronavirus – where it came from, who started it, how it could be prevented, how it could be cured, and what God’s role in all of this was. A part of the infodemic concerned with religion and was

often instigated by people of religion themselves. In many countries around the world, various religious communities were demonized as being responsible for certain outbreaks, for example, Muslims in India and the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, a new religious movement in South Korea. Some religious leaders preached that the pandemic was God's punishment upon a certain religious group for their sins. Some religious leaders propagated unfounded conspiracy theories. Others peddled unproven cures. Still others rejected sound scientific methods to address the virus.

The conditions of the pandemic had the potential to cause a breakdown in social and religious cohesion due to social isolation, less opportunity for various forms of dialogue, and the constant attack on truth and reality by fake news, misinformation and disinformation. Oftentimes, religious leaders and people of religion took part in the dissemination and the amplification of these destructive actions, therefore contributing to the intensification of the pandemic and its negative impact on humanity. Thus it is important that part of the post-pandemic task of the Church at various levels include an evaluation of how communication and dialogue was carried out within the Church as well as with other denominations and religions. It is certain that social issues will always be better addressed with the engagement from religion and constructive dialogue and collaboration among religions.

4. *Need for systematic digital literacy training for pastoral leaders and workers.* The experiences of the pastoral agents in this essay indicate that resorting to information and computer technology in order to carry out pastoral work was oftentimes an unexpected action needed to address the immediate situation of the pandemic. However, many did not have formal training in the skills needed to incorporate ICT into their work in a systematic manner. Whether what they did would turn out to be success or failure would depend on a combination of good execution, luck and grace of God. Our pastoral workers cannot be blamed for any lack of expertise because

before the pandemic came, there was not a real or urgent need to make use of ICT in their work. Traditional pastoral activities such as celebrating Mass, teaching catechism and ministry to the poor could be done quite well without heavily depending on ICT. Nevertheless, the pandemic brought a “new normal” to the life of society and the Church. Pastoral work in many instances became almost impossible without some use of ICT.

In the post-pandemic Church, while a certain return to former ways of carrying out pastoral work would be expected, it is also safe to say that nothing will ever be the same again. For better or for worse, the pandemic has changed the world, changed the way we see things, and changed the way we do things. In regards to digital technology, what in the past was seen as an option in pastoral ministry for some people, became an essential skill during the pandemic for anyone who wished to continue pastoral work. Thus, what the pandemic affirmed is that in the contemporary social milieu, digital literacy is an essential skill for pastoral workers of all capacities – from the highest leader of the Church to the parish catechist. As the coronavirus pandemic fades away, the dependence on ICT may decrease; however, it is safe to say that the need to use of ICT in pastoral work will most likely not go away. Therefore, digital literacy must be part of the formation program of all pastoral workers in the Church around the world so that ICT could be incorporated into the pastoral work in an effective, prudent and well-thought out manner.

5. *Anticipating future “pandemics”*. In an interview with the British newspaper *The Tablet*, Pope Francis commented, “I’m thinking of my responsibilities now, and what will come afterwards. What will be my service as Bishop of Rome, as head of the Church, in the aftermath? That aftermath has already begun to be revealed as tragic and painful, which is why we must be thinking about it now.”² The

² Austen Ivereigh, “Pope Francis says pandemic can be a ‘place of conversion’,” *The Tablet* (8 April 2020), <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/17845/pope-francis-says-pandemic-can-be-a-place-of-conversion->

sentiment of Pope Francis serves as important guidance for all pastoral leaders and workers in the Church to think about how to go forward after COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that it was not just about a pandemic involving an invisible virus, but it was also a pandemic of socially, politically and religiously debilitating and destructive information. There will still be other pandemics to come, perhaps not in the form of a virus, but in other forms that could be even more detrimental to the physical and spiritual well-being of humanity. Pastoral agents in the Church need to take their cue from Pope Francis to prepare for these pandemics by taking the necessary steps to discern, reflect, contemplate and respond to the signs of the times intentionally, conscientiously, systematically and with the utmost attention to the guidance of the Holy Spirit working in and with them through all these events in our lives.

As stated in the beginning of the book, the original intention for this project was to chronicle the signs of the times and the response by pastoral workers in the Church. We hope that with the contributions by various pastoral agents/workers as well as expert responders, we have contributed fruitfully to the conversation regarding this very consequential period in the life of the Church and in this contemporary state of the world. We thank all of the authors for sharing their experiences and ideas in order to make this modest book possible.

**PASTORAL CREATIVITY
AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
Global Experiences**

Published First Edition 2021
Asian Research for Religion and Social Communication
(St. John's University, Thailand)
Logos Publications, Inc. (Philippines)
ISBN 978-971-510-309-1

All rights reserved.

To place book order, please contact:
Email: arcstjohns.bkk@gmail.com

- “What makes this book precious is that it is not a collection of ‘recipes’ for pastoral service, but rather an invitation to keep the dialogue open, to reflect on what we have learnt from this new condition, and on how the Church should answer to the need of belongingness that emerged from this unprecedented time...Concrete stories on concrete encounters is what inspires the desire and encourages the effort to prepare more encounters between God and humanity. After all, pastoral creativity - with or without the pandemic - is an art of preparing the encounters! And the pandemic probably helps us to understand it better.”

Prof. Nataša Govekar

Director of the Theological-Pastoral Department, Dicastery for Communication, Vatican

- “...Pastoral reflections, strategies and actions - be they collective or individual- have come as the expression of the Church’s concern to be close to the flock in the time of need... [The authors’] thoughts and experiences will certainly encourage each one of us to know that we are not alone, that we do not withdraw into our comfort zones, but are called to be like our Master, the Good Shepherd, to reach out to and tend the flock entrusted to us.”

Fr. George Plathottam, SDB

Executive Secretary, FABC Office of Social Communication

- “Reading the different contributions in this book...touches my heart and assures me that many people still give their ‘widows’ mite’ for others and thereby prove that in a much deeper sense we are indeed together in one and the same boat assisting each other as we row the boat together to safe harbor.”

Msgr. Esteban Lo, LRM

National Director, Pontifical Mission Societies in the Philippines

- “The 28 authors in this book share their pastoral experiences and theological considerations in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their backgrounds are quite varied; they are from America, Asia, Europe and Oceania, as priests, religious or lay persons, working in parishes, religious houses, schools and social welfare institutions....Readers will be moved and encouraged from the process of how the authors overcome the difficulties and reach out to their flocks out of love. This book is a witness of how the ‘love of Christ impels us’ (2 Cor 5.14) in the ongoing pandemic.”

Most Rev. Daisuke Narui, SVD

Bishop of Niigata Diocese, Vice-president of Caritas Japan



Logos Publications, Inc.