

ARTICLES

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

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ABSTRACT

*A correlative resonance exists between the experience of communication in the new normal forced by the COVID-19 pandemic and each of the Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross. The words become the new normal way and guiding beacon to how religious communication can be effectuated during the pandemic. They herald hope in God – the first and the last Word of creation. The study begins by defining the global challenge and loss of human lives brought by COVID-19, a new arena of communication that reincarnates the reality of Christ's Last Words on the cross. These words never die but continue to live inspiring a sevenfold praxis of hope: 1) **entreaty**, 2) **disclosure**, 3) **relationship**, 4) **isolation**, 5) **exigency**, 6) **fulfillment** and 7) **entrustment**. Each relates with narrative experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic inviting persons not only to approach communication as a process of transmission but as semiotics offering newfound meanings and significance. Here communication never fails as listeners focus on the self-significance of the message. Religious communication enables people to seek what is best for those who receive the message and centers on how they*

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could grow not only in faith but likewise as human beings who bear God's image and likeness also in the time of the pandemic.

Keywords: *COVID-19, new normal, Christ, cross, communication*

Introduction to New Normal Religious Communication under COVID-19

Authentic religious belief in any culture is often challenged to preserve what has been ascribed to it and also to deal with crises that come. At the height of the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) the House of Congress of the Philippines on April 28, 2020 passed House Bill 6623 – *New Normal for the Workplace and Public Spaces Act of 2020* – which “will prepare and educate the Filipino public for life after the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions and to adapt to the new norms of physical distancing and institutionalizes a new way of life after the ECQ and serves as a guide to the public.”² The Bill explicitly provides standards that apply to: a) universal safety measures, such as mandatory wearing of masks in public places and social distancing; b) administration and regulation of government managed public spaces and privately managed spaces; c) organization of public transportation; and d) monitoring of schools, learning institutions, and private and industrial workplaces.

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

² Quoted by Filane Mikee Cervantes in “House leaders file ‘new normal’ bill”. *Philippine News Agency*. Retrieved from <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1101214> on April 28, 2020.

Christ on the cross?³ And how would they impact on communication among different religious faiths?

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

In philosophical Hinduism the whole of our ordinary experience is misleading; in reality all that exists is one unchanging Self. Buddhism denies this one unchanging self, but as part of its general denial that any selves exist. In the monotheistic religions, the world of selves and objects is real enough, but there is irony in the values we attach to this world – too often we place more importance on what is fleeting and trivial than on what is genuinely important. Several religious texts have thematic similarities with tragedies. Buddha’s question was the central question in tragedy: how should human beings handle suffering and death? The Biblical story of Job is similar in several ways to that of Oedipus. Jesus’ cry on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”, sounds tragic.⁴

A correlative resonance exists between the experience of religious communication in the new normal forced by the COVID-19 pandemic and each of the Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross. The Words become the new normal and guiding beacons to how religious communication can be effectuated during the pandemic.

³ This study utilizes the definition of AFFORDANCE by Meriam-Webster which considers it as, “the quality or property of an object that defines its possible uses or makes clear how it can or should be used. See “Affordance.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/affordance> on October 2, 2020. Throughout the study references to the citations of the Seven Last Words are capitalized.

⁴ John Morrell, *Comedy, Tragedy and Religion* (Albany: State University of New York, 1999), 41.

For Pope Francis they herald a compass of hope in life and in God⁵ and entrustment to Him who is ultimately the Alpha and the Omega – the first and the last Word of creation. Applying an interdisciplinary exploratory method from the biblical, philosophical, psychological and communication fields, this study begins by defining the global challenge and death brought by COVID-19 which has become the new arena of communication representing the reality of Christ's Last Words on the Cross. These Words never die but continue to live inspiring a seven-fold praxis of hope:

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

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

⁵ Quoted by Robin Gomes in "Pope: crucifix our compass and hope in life", *Vatican News* (March 24, 2021). Accessed <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-03/pope-francis-book-prayer-service-march27-2020-covid19.html> on 25 September 2021.

Etymology of the *New Normal*

The concept of *the new normal* is neither something “new” nor an outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like social media communication, the phrase *new normal* can be considered as a “product of evolution rather than a revolution.”⁶ Such phrase made a common appearance during the post-World War I in 1918 in several books and articles. Among these was Henry Wise Wood’s article, “Beware!”:

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

Some contend that we should first envisage **the new normal** and carve the measures of transition to suit its requirements. Others believe that we should cautiously feel our way through the period of transition and arrive at what **the new normal** shall be by the road of experience. The first would attempt reconstruction by synthetic process; the second would achieve it by natural growth. Who shall say that a new normal, artificially compounded at this distance from the future, will work? Who shall say that a new normal, patiently sought through trial and error, will not work?⁷

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

Within the sphere of religious communication, *The Christian Advocate* in 1921 published this: “Let the Church loose itself from the

⁶ Phrase is affirmed by cognitive psychologists Cheryl Coyle and Heather Vaughn in “Social Networking: Communication Revolution or Evolution”, *Bell Labs Technical Journal* 13 (2008): 2,13.

⁷ Henry W. Wood in “Beware”, *National Electric Light Association Bulletin* (December 1918).

destroying meshes of the old normal and set itself resolutely and with unshakable faith for the real tasks of the present day. It is the new normal, then, that beckons the Church of God”⁸. The “task of the present day” implies the affordance of existential faith – applying the old normal to current challenges and necessities.

The new normal affordance of freedom was illustrated by Robert A. Heinlein in his 1966 novel, *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*, citing: “Citizens, requests may reach you through your comrade neighbors. I hope you will comply willingly; it will speed the day when I can bow out and life can get back to normal — a **new normal**, free of the Authority, free of guards, free of troops stationed on us, free of passports and searches and arbitrary arrests.”⁹ The end of freedom points to life going back to the normal.

In the past ten to fifteen years, the “new normal” occurred often with the affordance of a new standard rooted in expectation or experience. This was highlighted in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks with book titles such as: *The New Normal: How FDNY Firefighters Are Rising to the Challenge of Life After September 11* (2002), *Assessing the New Normal: Liberty and Security for the Post–September 11 United States* (January 30, 2003), *After 9/11 in the ‘New’ Normal: Who Are We? Why Are We Here? Where Are Going?* (February 1, 2003), and *The New Normal: Living a Fear-Free Life in a Fear-Driven World* (2005).¹⁰ They underline a hope for the future.

Other writers persisted in highlighting the belief in novelty rather than conventionality of the phrase. In her 2004 foreword to John Putzier’s book *Weirdos in the Workplace: The New Normal - Thriving in the Age of the Individual*, Libby Sartain claims that the phrase “the new normal” is a recent coinage.¹¹ In the same year Roger McNamee

⁸ “The New Normal” in *The Christian Advocate* – (Volume 96, 1921), 66.

⁹ Robert A. Heinlein, *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*. (New York: Penguin Random House, 1966), 152.

¹⁰ To these I add the book I published: *Tragedy and Religious Identity in Social Media: A case study of the textual narrative responses to the YouTube “September 11 2001 Video* (Rome: Pontifical Salesian University, 2015).

¹¹ See John Putzier, *Weirdos in the Workplace: The New Normal - Thriving in*

writes that “the new normal is a time of substantial possibilities if you are willing to play by the new rules for the long term. In the new normal it is more important to do things right than to succumb to the tyranny of urgency.”¹² Fundamentally, McNamee highlights the correlation of the new normal with the demands of the economy to which most countries are not immune. Here, one can mention China’s economy which in recent years has shown a marked slowdown, with decreased growth rates from double digit levels (before the 2007-2009 financial crisis) to around 7 percent in 2014. In that year, Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, indicated that China was entering a “new normal” (Chinese: 新常态).¹³ The economic association with the term was subsequently popularized by the press and came to refer to expectations of more stable economic growth and medium-to-long term economic growth rates in China and elsewhere for the future.

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

The Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross

The Seven Last Words of Christ have always been part of the Holy Week celebration in Christian Churches around the world. They

the Age of the Individual. (New Jersey: FT Prentice Hall, 2004).

¹² Quoted by Jan Leusen, in “What is the origin of ‘the new normal’ as a freestanding phrase?” Retrieved from Quora <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-origin-of-the-new-normal-as-a-freestanding-phrase>, December 2020. Roger McNamee has published his thoughts in his book, *The New Normal: Great Opportunities in a Time of Great Risk*. (London: Penguin Books, Ltd.), 2004.

¹³ United Nations ESCAP, “China’s ‘New Normal’: Challenges Ahead for Asia-Pacific Trade” ESCAP Trade Insights, Issue 11. July 9, 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.unescap.org/resources/chinas-new-normal-challenges-ahead-asia-pacific-trade-escap-trade-insights-issue-no11#>.

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

Table 1: Citations of the Seven Last Words Across the Gospel					
Seven Words	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John	Religious Communication
1. “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”			Lk 23:33-37		Entreaty
2. “Today, you will be with me in paradise.”			Lk 23:39-43		Disclosure
3. “Woman, behold thy son. Son, behold thy mother.”				Jn 19:25-27	Relationship
4. “ <i>Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?</i> ” (My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.)	Mt 27:45-46	Mark 15:34			Isolation
5. “I thirst.”				Jn 19:28-29	Exigency
6. “It is finished.”				Jn 19:30	Fulfillment

7. “Into your hands I commend my spirit.”			Lk 23:44-46		Entrustment
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Each of the Seven communicates a narrative reality of human experience similarly prevalent in the post pandemic times. Tacit agenda themes that anchor on a sevenfold praxis of hope for new normal religious communication can be deduced from each of the Words: *entreaty* - invocation (1st word), *disclosure* - accompaniment (2nd word), *relationship* – encounter (3rd word), *isolation* – human frailty (4th word), *exigency* - needs (5th word), *fulfilment* - healing (6th word), and *entrustment* - identity (7th word). They are discussed in the following:

1st Word (Entreaty): “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” – (Lk 23:33-37)

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, **“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”** And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”¹⁴

The 1st Word is recorded only by Luke. He is described by scholars as an expert in communicating narrative details of events. In the 1st, 2nd, and 7th Words of Christ on the cross, Luke communicates a unitary link in the identity of Christ who harmonizes himself with God and humanity: “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do” (v. 34). Here Christ invokes the mercy of God for the people who in crucifying him, “do not know what they are doing.” The importance of entreaty in religious communication emerges from the prayer for mercy for the people. This

¹⁴ Bible references are all taken from the *New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition* (NRSVCE). Accessed <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Revised-Standard-Version-NRSV-Bible/> on 1 September 2021.

invocation demonstrates the dual etymological concept of mercy – *rahamin* (רַחֵם) and *hesed* (חֶסֶד). *rahamin* is synonymous with tender compassion¹⁵ and often induces peripheral acts or resources that can alleviate a felt need of human nourishment. It is noteworthy that Christ, who himself needs alleviation from the felt pain of the cross, makes an invocation of mercy for the people. More than *rahamin* what Christ has communicated is *hesed*, the second etymological meaning of mercy. *hesed* refers to covenantal love, steadfast loyalty, commitment or promise.¹⁶ Christ's invocation of mercy carries an awareness of commitment and steadfast loyalty to his identity as a primary communicator of God's covenantal love. Religious communication in the new normal challenges persons to go beyond peripheral communication which focuses only on transmitting acts and resources of kindness to rooting such acts in commitment to one's identity as children of God.

Mercy in its dual etymological significance is embodied during the COVID-19 pandemic in the reality of the renowned *Maginahawa Community Pantry* initiative in the Philippines, which started on April 20, 2021. Its 26-year-old founder, Ana Patricia Non, emphasizes its goal which she epitomizes in the slogan: "*Kumuha ayon sa pangangailangan. Magbigay ayon sa kakayahan*" (Get according to your needs. Give according to your capacity).¹⁷ It is a localized representation of the international "mutual aid" that embeds the dual meaning of mercy as tender compassion as well as authentic commitment. Currently there are more than 3,000 offshoot community pantries spread throughout the country.

¹⁵ Cf. Word Internet Bible College, *God's Mercy; Longsuffering, Patience and Sympathy*. Accessed <http://internetbiblecollege.net/tWIBC/Subjects-01-10/Subject-01/Gods%20Mercy,%20Longsuffering,%20Patience%20And%20Sympathy.htm> on September 30, 2021.

¹⁶ Jovan Payes, *Word Study: Jonah and God's Benevolent Love (Jonah 4:2)* in *Biblical Faith at the Corner of Exegesis and Discipleship* (2018). Accessed <https://biblicalfaith.wordpress.com/tag/hesed-and-rahamim/> October 1, 2021.

¹⁷ Ana Patricia Non is a graduate of UP College of Fine Arts (Philippines), and an entrepreneur running a small furniture making shop whose operations stopped due to the pandemic. Before the pandemic she has been a volunteer and organizer of activities to help the poor. A brief overview of Non is found in Joseph Pedrajas, "Who is Patricia Non, the woman who sparked kindness through the Maginhawa community pantry?" in *Manila Bulletin*. Accessed <https://mb.com.ph/2021/05/06/who-is-patricia-non-the-woman-who-sparked-kindness-through-the-maginhawa-community-pantry/> on September 30, 2021.

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

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

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

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

Primary words do not signify things, but they intimate relations. Primary words do not describe something that might exist independently of them, but being spoken they bring about existence. Primary words are spoken from the being. If Thou is said, the I of the combination I-Thou is said along with it. If It is said, the I of the combination I-It is said along with it. The primary word I-Thou can only be spoken with the whole being. The primary word I-It can never be spoken with the whole being.¹⁸

¹⁸ Martin Buber 1937, *I and Thou*, transl. by Ronald Gregor Smith,

Analyzing Buber, Michael Zank, believes that this revelation “is a model of existence... a revelation of ‘presence’” (*Gegenwart*). In contrast to “object” (*Gegenstand*), the presence revealed by revelation as encounter occupies the space “in between” the subject and the other (a tree, a person, a work of art, God). This “in between” space is defined as “mutual” (*gegenseitig*).¹⁹ In the disclosure of Christ and the criminal who defends him, there is a felt mutual exchange of presence. This felt and mutual presence empowers the latter to make his request: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (v.42). It is a religious communication of his belief in Christ and his kingdom where solace abounds. Acknowledging this presence within himself, Christ responds and affirms: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (v.43). It is worth noting that a criminal, who represents an imperfect instrument of communication, is to be with Christ in Paradise. The apparent imperfection of the instrument of communication is strengthened by the truth of the message that Christ on his part carries and embodies. Religious communication in the new normal invites persons to live and share the same experience. Despite human imperfection, persons are invited to a more authentic disclosure accompanied by a felt *Gegenwart* (presence) and one that is *gegenseitig* (mutual).

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

3rd Word (Relationship): “Woman, behold thy son. Son, behold thy mother.” – (Jn 19:25-27)

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother,

Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark. 2nd Edition New York: Scribners, 1958. 1st Scribner Classics ed. New York, NY: Scribner, 2000, c1986, 3.

¹⁹ See Martin Buber in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Accessed <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/buber/> on 3 September 2021.

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

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

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

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

can thereby reach the peripheries of human existence.²⁰

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

Those who communicate, in effect, become neighbors... Jesus shifts our understanding: it is not just about seeing the other as someone like myself, but of the ability to make myself like the other. Communication is really about realizing that we are all human beings, children of God. I like seeing this power of communication as “neighborliness”.²¹

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

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

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land[a] until

²⁰ Pope Francis, “Message for the 48th World Communications Day of Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter” (June 1, 2021). Accessed https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20140124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html on September 25, 2021.

²¹ Pope Francis, “Message for the 48th World Communications Day”.

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

The dependency of Matthew on Mark explains why the 4th Word appears almost identically in both Gospels. Christ cries from the cross in despair for his felt abandonment by God: "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*" (v.46). Reflective of Psalm 22:1 (*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me so far from my cries of anguish?*), the Words of the middle utterance of Christ presents a stark contrast to the 1st Word of entreaty wherein he asks the Father to forgive the people of their misdeeds. It is a paradox between absolution and abandonment, trust and inquiry, and identity and doubt. Here the feeling of security and certainty seems no longer sustainable as the weight and pain of the cross overcomes Christ's body and echoes isolation, human frailty, and weakness. It is a painful encounter with God, a cry of human pain where He is mostly sought.

COVID-19 experiences of death and isolation manifest such pain. There have been instances when loved ones are taken by relatives to hospitals in the Philippines, and after some days and a large amount of hospital expenses incurred, they are taken back home already in ashes being declared as COVID-19 positive. Sadly, for the many Filipinos who are poor, this has become a common narrative. The 4th Word, however, challenges persons to transform the death that comes. Not that the dead are brought back to life, but that their passing away becomes easier to bear for their families. For Philip Goble Jr. the cry of abandonment in an inescapable and impending death is a cry of dereliction. It is a cry from the cross, "spoken in front of those surrounding Christ's execution as a final plea for repentance to those who opposed him and, simultaneously,

as Words of comfort to his followers.”²² Religious communication in the new normal is clothed with the stigma of isolation and human frailty yet continues to live in the heart that beats a treasured value of hope. By his death Christ has enabled persons to recognize the grace to never be forgotten by God.

5th Word (Exigency): “I thirst” – (Jn 19:28-29)

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

The 5th Word from John, “I thirst” (also same as “I am thirsty”) can be interpreted as an extension of the “I am” sayings of Christ. To mention a few: “I am the Good Shepherd” (Jn 10-11), “I am the Light of the World” (Jn 8:12), “I am the Bread of Life” (Jn 6:35). Together they refer to an awareness of identity and response to a need – the Shepherd who looks after the need of the sheep, the world in need of light, and the persons who need nourishment. Shortest among the Seven Last Words, the 5th Word communicates a longing satisfaction to a physical need, thirst (v.28). It too rekindles Christ’s conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well asking her of water to drink (Jn 4:1-30). Reference to Christ “knowing all was now finished and to fulfill scripture” (v.28) is found in a prophecy in Psalm 22:15: “My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death.” Christ’s actions done in fulfillment of scripture highlight the plan of God for the lives of people.

Awareness of identity and response to a need refers one back to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs which he presented in 1943 as part of his work on “Theory of Human Motivation”. It is comprised of **basic needs** (physiological and safety – food, water, warmth rest, security and safety),

²² Philip E. Goble Jr., “Eloi, Eloi Lama Sabachthani: Christ’s Final Plea for Sinners, Encouragement for Disciples”, in *The American Journal of Biblical Theology* (Volume 22 Issue 10, March 7, 2021), 19. Goble makes four foundational precepts in this regard: 1) Christ’s purpose of being on earth and His understanding of that purpose; 2) the relationship between Jesus and the Father; 3) an understanding that Christ had the power to choose His path; and 4) the physical toll that Jesus’ scourging and crucifixion had on his human body, 2.

psychological needs (belonging, love and esteem – intimacy, friends, prestige and feeling of accomplishment) and **self-fulfillment needs** (self-actualization – achieving one’s full potential including creative activities).²³ In 1998, Maslow added self-transcendence to self-actualization. He defined it as “connecting to something beyond the ego or to help others find self-fulfillment and realize their potential.”²⁴

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

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

6th Word (Fulfilment): “It is finished” – (Jn 19:30)

When Jesus had received the wine, he said, “**It is finished.**” Then

²³ Abraham Maslow. “A theory of human motivation” in *Psychological Review*, 50, (1943), 370-396. Accessed <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm> on 20 September 2021.

²⁴ See W. Huitt. “Maslow’s hierarchy of needs” in *Educational Psychology Interactive* (Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University, 2007). Accessed <http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/topics/regsys/maslow.html> on October 1, 2021.

he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

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

The perfect tense is a combination of two Greek tenses: the Present tense, and the Aorist tense. The Aorist tense is punctiliar: meaning something that happens at a specific point in time; a moment. The Present tense is linear: meaning something that continues and has ongoing results/implications.²⁵

The two senses combined are important because when Christ says, "It is finished," what he is actually saying is "It is finished and will continue to be finished." The 6th Word therefore signals not a closing or termination. Rather, it opens a door to a new stage of relationship, a turning point when one continues to strain forward towards healing and growth. Rick Renner, a Greek New Testament scholar, hints on this: "[Christ] bore our griefs. He carried our sorrows. He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. He was chastised for our peace. He was scourged for our healing."²⁶

²⁵ Among the scholars are those from Columbia International University. See *It is Finished! (A Look at the Greek)*. Accessed <https://www.ciu.edu/content/it-finished-look-greek> on October 1, 2021. Simply explained the "perfect tense" concept is like high school students, who in graduating say goodbye to their old school and say hello to a new college school.

²⁶ Rick Renner, "*Tetelestai* - It Is Finished!" in *Crosswalk.com* (January 12, 2021). Accessed <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/it-is-finished-11571312.html> on October 1, 2021. He further notes four specific applications on the 6th Word: 1) This was Jesus' exclamation that He had finished the work the Father had sent Him to do. 2) The word *tetelestai* was the equivalent of the Hebrew word spoken by the high priest when he

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

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

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

The 7th Word parallels the 1st Word in its reference to the “Father” and can also be considered as part of an entreaty. Recognizing that everything is finished and that he has done what is asked of him to which he has shown commitment, Christ entrusts himself to God. It is an entrustment of someone who is very much aware of his identity in relationship with God. To God, Christ commends (συνιστάω, *synistaō*) his spirit (v.46). Bible Concordances translate συνιστάω, *synistaō* with commend or entrust associating it with, “set together, i.e., (by implication) to introduce (favorably), or (figuratively) to exhibit; intransitively, to stand near, or (figuratively) to constitute”.²⁷ It

presented a sacrificial lamb without spot or blemish. 3) In a secular sense, the word *tetelestai* was used in the business world to signify the full payment of a debt. 4) In classical Greek times, the word *tetelestai* depicted a turning point when one period ended, and another new period began.

²⁷ See Strong's Concordance, Greek Dictionary (συνιστάω, *synistaō* G4921). Accessed <https://www.quoteskosmos.com/bible/bible-concordance/>

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

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

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

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

Sevenfold Praxis of Hope in Religious Communication

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

1. **Entreaty** involves invocation that roots in greater ownership of selves and dialogue. In religious communication, this should be holistic and integral – heart, mind and will. Christ acknowledges a double identity in his 1st Word: *God and Self* (Christ identifies the Father and their relationship) and the *Other* (invocation for those who “know not what they do”). Acknowledgement of identity is a key to a successful dialogue and invocation. During the post pandemic period, entreaty necessitates recognition of identity of the interactants and a sincere commitment to preserve its integrality which would aid in dialogue.
2. **Disclosure** comes with accompaniment. It exudes a symbolic presence of “paradise” (2nd Word) that nourishes and shares in the journey of life. Religious communication in the new normal allows persons to act and express their sorrows and joys and successes and failures. This is the experience narrated in the 2nd Word. In the new normal, persons are invited evermore to communicate, interact and strain forward armed with a network of limitations but equally with an embodied promise network of hope.
3. **Relationship** is always an encounter. It is created and defined anew in the religious communication of the 3rd Word. It goes beyond linkages of blood and can win over the daily battles in life. In the light of tragedy of the cross and COVID-19, religious communication can be considered as an expression of felt experience and presence that portrays what it is to be human and the often contrasting and extreme emotion that comes with it – sadness and joy, hope and despair, hate and love.
4. **Isolation** in communication is often a result of human frailty which can be considered as noise and barriers in process communication. Isolation is a deafening noise alongside being forsaken. Felt presence in religious communication during the pandemic is the

panacea for the noise of isolation. It transmits strength amid weakness. The pandemic evoked despair, isolation, and death. Religious communication is equal to hope and to God's felt presence as Emmanuel.

5. **Exigency** is described as awareness of needs. Like entreaty in the 1st Word, it includes awareness of identity and response to a need that longs for satisfaction. All persons have needs and every representation and satisfaction of a need is communication. Religious communication in the post pandemic period encourages interactants from highlighting and living communication as process (mainly focusing on transmission and feedback of information) to valuing and living communication as semiotics (empowering through the construction and exchange of meanings). Truth reveals itself in the construction of meaning. It respects individuality and needs and leads to a greater realization of one's potential.
6. **Fulfillment** associates itself with healing and integrality. To many, life with God brings fulfillment. Religious communication strains forward towards this fulfillment through integrality and healing. It is not limited solely to religious terms (grace, sin, God, Christ) but open to the foundational significance of such terms (goodness, love, forgiveness). They express religious identity "in other words". While they have a role to play in the construction of religious identity, religious communication can also play a role in its deconstruction. Here the role of negotiation is vital. Fulfillment reveals a need for greater vigilance towards acceptance, rejection, reconfiguration, and innovation in religious communication.
7. **Entrustment** is an affirmation of identity. An interplay of identities is presented in the Seven Last Words and the 7th Word shapes them all as one. Responsibility is part of such shaping. In the new normal religious communication, authentic responsibility ensues one's narration of self, in a sort of evolution illustrated with the transformation of the common concepts of *homo sapiens* to *homo technologicus*. Religious communication in the new normal encourages further studies of this transformation to becoming truly *homo Dei*. It provides people with the capacity and opportunity to become people of God. Here God becomes the pandemic hero

present amid conflict and suffering. He invites people to a response that affirms or reaffirms their identities in relationship with Him.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is important to highlight the question of counter-culturality brought about by COVID-19 and its disruption of the communication of religious faith, particularly the Filipino religious traditions, made at the start of this study. Here the distinction between the religious communication of faith as belief (creed) and religious communication of the expression of faith (rituals) becomes pertinent. Both are part of the dimensions of religiosity that complement one another. Faith as encountered and lived will always be paramount in religious communication during the pandemic. While belief can be enriched and nourished too by the expression of faith, the latter must be guided by the former and not vice versa. The communication of religious tradition should not only be limited to rituals. Rather, these rituals should be guided by our religious creed. Rituals can never be the sole norm of faith. Rituals attain their significance if they are based on creed. These can be best communicated in the age-old Christian dictum: “Love God with all your heart and love your neighbor like yourself” (Lk 10:27) that can be a good measure for the communication of Filipino religious devotions and thus part of the new normal. “Loving our neighbor as ourselves” becomes a great miracle where healing can begin and where communication of religious identity can be best understood. The sevenfold praxis of hope in religious communication bears witness to this.

Second, the converging affordances from the Seven Last Word of Christ on the cross and COVID-19 demonstrate that religious communication is very much a part of God and part of his created world. Religious communication in the new normal strongly affirms God’s relationship with creation and the realities and events. In tragic events like the COVID-19 pandemic, religious communication offers and invites persons to a new perspective and attitude. It allows those in situations of isolation to deepen relationships acknowledging personal limitations and trust. It is an invitation to an entreaty and encounter that strains forward chained within a network of limitation but equally armed

within an embodied network of hope. The pandemic comes as an event awaiting hope and entrustment. Here God is always the communication hero who champions it. He is present and invites people to a response that affirms and reaffirms the human spirit clothed with the image and likeness that is His very own.

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