CHRISTIAN INSTITUTE FOR
CHRISTE
THEOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT
HOPE FOR HUMANITY
Spiritual Immunity in a Pandemicised World
Contributed by CHRISTE Research Fellows
Edited by Sherman Kuek OFS

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Introduction to CHRISTE 101

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS BOOK

Dr Adah-Kole Emmanuel Onjewu, a native of Nigeria, is currently Lecturer in Business Strategy at Coventry University in the United Kingdom. He obtained a PhD in Management from the University of Plymouth (UK). Adah is Research Fellow in Business and Management for CHRISTE.

Dr Pauline Leong from Malaysia is currently Associate Professor at Sunway University, Malaysia. Her PhD in Political Communication was conferred by Monash University (Malaysia). Pauline is Research Fellow in Communication for CHRISTE.

Dr Melissa Sharmini from Malaysia presently works as Senior Lecturer at the Malaysian National University (*Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*). Her PhD in Multimodal Studies was conferred by Melbourne University (Australia). Melissa is Research Fellow in Social Semiotics and Multimodality for CHRISTE.

The Rev. Father Ferdinand Purnomo, OCD, is from Indonesia and is currently based in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore as a Carmelite friar and priest. His Licentiate in Biblical Theology was conferred by the Pontifical Gregorian University (Rome). Fr Ferdinand is Research Fellow in Biblical Theology for CHRISTE.

Dr JHW Chan is Malaysian and serves as Lecturer in Theology at St Paul's Theological College, an Anglican theological college in Kuala Lumpur. His PhD in Philosophical Theology was obtained at the

University of Bristol (UK). Chan is Co-founding Research Fellow in Theology and Philosophy for CHRISTE.

The Rev. Deacon Dr Sherman Kuek, OFS, is Malaysian and serves as a permanent deacon for the Roman Catholic Church in Malaysia besides also being the convenor of the Splendour Project (www.splendourproject.com). His Doctor of Theology was conferred by Trinity Theological College (Singapore). Sherman is Founding/Leading Research Fellow in Ecumenical and Catholic Thought for CHRISTE.

Mr Doulos Paul Lee is a Malaysian and currently works as a manager for the Central Bank of Malaysia (*Bank Negara Malaysia*). He studied for his MSc in Cognitive and Decision Science with University College London (UK). Doulos is Research Fellow in Behavioural Science for CHRISTE and has collaborated as proofreader for this book.

PREAMBLE

Even the toughest seasons of the human experience present opportunities for resilience and societal development. At the onset of the current Covid-19 pandemic, the global devastation sparked a conversation among several friends who shared a common faith as Christians and a common vocation as scholars. As we witnessed the geopolitical rivalry and widening economic inequality taking place among nations and regions being exacerbated by the pandemic, leaving the people at the grassroots more bewildered than they initially were, we realised that the circumstances called for the coming together of thoughtful individuals who would be willing to rise above their personal concerns to embark on efforts to help global society to make sense of this unprecedented event.

History has demonstrate again and again that sparks of hope experienced by human society during the most pressing times have almost always been catalysed by well-meaning individuals of faith, not so much by official institutions, and even less so by political entities. Whilst it is true that institutions are much needed for concerted endeavours, it is the intention of the individuals within those institutions that matters more. Resonating with this sentiment, our group of Christian scholars decided to form the Christian Institute for Theological Engagement (CHRISTE). We are not an entire band of theologians, for a good number of our Research Fellows and Specialised Practitioners are personnel who are trained in various fields outside of theological studies. The purpose of our coming together was to provide a common witness to our Christian faith during these times of adversity, and also to engage in

meaningful cross-disciplinary discourse whilst inviting society to eavesdrop on our conversations as we express our understanding from a position of Christian faith.

This book represents our maiden publication, and it will neither be the only publication nor the only format in which our works are published. But perhaps what is most striking about this maiden publication is that it takes place on the 200th day since Covid-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation. The authors contributing to this book do not mean to provide solutions to the pandemic. We mean only to offer resources, based on our studies and experiences, to help our readers to better cope with situations resulting from this crisis, and to assure you that even in the darkest moments of humanity our faith is not hopeless.

The aim and purpose of this book transcends the conventions of scholarship. It pertains to faith and humanity, not industry. I have therefore personally decided to afford our contributing authors freedom in their styles of writing and expression so that they would draw you, our readers, into their minds and experiences in the most meaningful ways possible. Do keep in mind also that our authors write from different cultural and geographical perspectives, since we are undertaking our academic scholarship in different parts of the world. Having said that, the current pandemic has betrayed the reality that we are all not as different from one another as we tend to think. It has to be noted also that our authors write from the perspectives of various Christian traditions whilst holding to the dictum commonly attributed to the

fourth-century Saint Augustine of Hippo on whose memorial we launched our Christian Institute for Theological Engagement (CHRISTE): "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." As you read this collation of our various articles, know that we think and feel with you as you wade through the waters of change and challenge now and in the months to come.

If you are reading this book and have never heard of the Christian Institute for Theological Engagement (CHRISTE) before, we are a gathering of Christian scholars and practitioners chartered as a Research Institute under the prerogative of the United Nations Treaty Series 49006/49007. In our efforts to provide a common witness to the Christian faith as a group of thinkers and practitioners, our given task and methodology is to interpret, analyse, and respond to societal realities through the Christian mind. More detailed information about us is found at the end of this book.

This book has been written prayerfully and we likewise hope that you will read it in the same spirit. As Founder and Leading Research Fellow of CHRISTE, I record herein my utmost respect and admiration for my fellow friends and colleagues who have contributed to this work with no purpose other than the common good of society and the glory of God. In a personal way, I have found the contributions of these authors to this book deeply meaningful and moving. I invite you to pray for them so that they may be strengthened to remain faithful in the vocation to which the Lord has called them and empowered in their scholarly labours.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

On September 27, 2020, the 200th day of the declaration of Covid-19 as a pandemic by the World Health Organisation,

Rev. Deacon Dr Sherman Kuek, OFS
Founding / Leading Research Fellow in Catholic and Ecumenical Thought, Christian Institute for Theological Engagement (CHRISTE)

COVID-19, LIVELIHOODS, AND OUR CHURCH

by Adah-Kole Emmanuel Onjewu

While counting the cost of the pandemic, resilience prompts us to reflect in anticipation of the big rebuild. Lives have, of course, been the greatest casualty of the disease but to despair and sit on our hands is to forget that there will be life after the virus. For people of faith and ability the question is, could we make life post Covid-19 better than before it? I know we will.

The last affliction to degrade livelihoods to the nearest magnitude was the 2008-09 financial mess. The greed of corporate banking had been in overdrive with wheels greased by mis-sold mortgage backed securities – financial instruments soon described as "synthetic" and "toxic". Bankers became stupendously wealthy by offering mortgages with repayment holidays to families [homeowners] who definitely could not pay up. Then they [bankers] packaged these mortgages, millions of them, advertised and sold them off as collateralised debt obligations to investors. When the mortgage repayment holidays expired, families became liable to investors who indirectly owned their homes. In turn, investors had taken out bank loans to be repaid with funds from families' mortgage repayments. Suddenly, families owed investors and investors owed banks. There was no money to be exchanged anywhere for the simple fact that no real value had been created. It was all "synthetic" and the effect was "toxic", mainly on families whose homes were foreclosed. The whole thing smacked of "a foolish man, who built his house on sand" (Matthew 7:26).

Ever since, economic recovery has been slow and incomes have either stagnated or grown at the slowest pace on record. In many parts of Europe, where wages have risen, they are still overtaken by inflation to the extent that families' take-home pay just would not take them home. In the United Kingdom, civil servants endure sporadic and fractional pay increases either side of one percent while members of parliament are awarded annual increments of up to three percent. This may seem trivial, a variance of plus or minus two percent at a given time, but Christians may draw a telling moral lesson that "we are not in this together". In public finance, the austerity vehicle seems to have been manufactured without brakes, and it is hard to imagine the return of several social services that formerly supported livelihoods. While this is happening, e-commerce and technology companies have thrived, yielding astronomic growth and income (for investors) since 2008-09. The gig economy of Amazon, Uber and Airbnb is purposely configured with value chains to circumvent overheads, and a global presence to scour cheap labour while offering insecure employment terms. We must not spite these companies; we must learn from them and aspire for better.

As a life-long Catholic, I know first-hand our congregation's allergy to wealth creation. It is, we feel, downright incompatible with our social engineering. To a disabling fault, Matthew 19:24 – "again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God", has guided much of our economic behaviour. It is true that "the love of money could be the root of all evil" (1 Timothy 6:10) but, inexplicably, we

overlook Psalm 112: 3 – "wealth and riches are in his house, and his righteousness endures forever". We also forget Saint Paul's letter to the Thessalonians 4: 11 urging that in order to "live quietly", we should "mind our own affairs and work with our hands". We disregard the duty to "work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts" (Haggai 2: 4). Work is what precedes wealth, it is the reward for effort. We must also understand that wealth is the outcome of real value creation.

The assessment is not that we currently do not work at all. We do, we work extremely hard. Families, the basic unit of our catechism, are overstretched to the point of choosing work over faith and it is sometimes understandable [1]. Sacramental leniency to accommodate work has become the order instead of the other way around because models of employment have been designed by a parallel civilisation that forecloses our faith. We are consumers (both as employees and customers) in the current system rather than producers in it or of it. Therefore, the perennial layoff of Christians and diminished livelihoods in the aftermath of economic shocks should not be surprising. I do not suggest that we are targets, I just know we are victims. Our Catholic ministry needs to evolve into production. When we realise that abundance is nature's way, and that wealth is not a sin but our attachment to it, then the shackles will come off. Remember the story of Job? In wealth or poverty, we can persist in the pursuit of wisdom by serving God and shunning evil.

Ironically, the gig economy and financial technology firms offer us a template to initiate Catholic entrepreneurship. The

methodology of Amazon, Uber and Airbnb's success are no secret, and their business models are freely available on the internet. Now is a particularly interesting period to mobilise in the advent of the fourth industrial revolution. Opportunities abound in artificial intelligence, robotics, machine learning, augmented/virtual reality, blockchain and cryptocurrency solutions. I know these ventures are foreign as cardinal sin to the average Catholic, but they need not be. They are not the preserve of Silicon Valley. We also think that to be an entrepreneur is to be technically adept and do it all by ourselves. No. An entrepreneur's job is merely to assemble resources – land, labour and capital – and to take risks (or show courage). It behoves all of us, Catholics with able minds and bodies, to show courage and serve the Lord through our enterprise. Why is Catholic entrepreneurship of importance? Because we can design an economy that serves our divine purpose. Because we can replace public services with religious services in education, health, and social care. Because we can, through our own work, employment, and production, consecrate our ideals of family, compassion, hope, and love in the world. This is our new evangelisation which can no longer be outsourced to the government or our clergy.

Do not be mistaken, it would take some time for "Catholic entrepreneurship" to become a thing with traction, or for the "Catholic dollar" to emerge as an exciting area of research. Nonetheless, post Covid-19, with a change in our faithful's mindset towards wealth creation, and if we "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, all these things will be added to us" (Matthew 6:33). Beyond thinking in literal terms of land, labour and capital, we must recognise that algorithms and weightless (cloud-

based) products are where future wealth and value creation reside, compelling us to work smarter in addition to harder. When we have done our bit, we can rest assured that "everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them…this is the gift of God" (Ecclesiastes 5:19). Entrepreneurship takes courage but unlike Abraham, we have the advantage that God has already shown us our land, it is up to us to emerge a great Catholic nation and gather his blessings (Genesis 12:1-3). Finally, through our descendants, may all the nations of the earth, too, be blessed (Genesis 22:18). Righteousness first, and then work.

Notes:

[1] Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2207.

COMMUNICATING FAITH DIGITALLY DURING COVID-19: AN OVERVIEW OF THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

by Pauline Leong

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented disruptions in all aspects of life worldwide, including religious practice and worship. The first Covid-19 cases that appeared in Malaysia was on 25 January 2020, involving three tourists from China who entered Johor via Singapore. On 29 January 2020, Archbishop Julian Leow of Kuala Lumpur, Bishop Sebastian Francis of Penang and Bishop Bernard Paul of Melaka Johor, issued a pastoral recommendation to the clergy, religious and lay faithful of the Catholic community in Peninsular Malaysia. In their pastoral recommendation, they advised persons who had flu-like symptoms to stay home and avoid public places including churches. Those who were unable to attend Mass for those reasons were encouraged to make an act of spiritual communion, which was to offer a prayer at home with a desire to be in union with the Eucharistic Lord. The Archbishop and Bishops also urged for prayers to be offered privately and in parishes for all Covid-19 victims and frontline medical staff fighting the pandemic.

On 8 February 2020, another pastoral recommendation letter was issued with additional precautions such as receiving holy communion only on the hands, avoiding handshakes during the

Sign of Peace, and the emptying of holy water fonts. The Catholic faithful were reminded that those with flu-like symptoms were exempted from Mass and everyone should continue to practise good hygiene by regularly washing hands with soap. Priests and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion were advised to take extra care in disinfecting hands before Holy Communion.

By 16 February 2020, the number of cases in Malaysia rose to 22, representing the first wave of cases. On 17 February 2020, a pastoral recommendation for the imposition of ashes for Ash Wednesday was issued by Archbishop Julian Leow, as president of the Catholic Bishops of Malaysia. It was agreed that priests and all extraordinary ministers were to thoroughly wash and disinfect their hands before and immediately after imposing the ashes. Unlike the previous custom of drawing a cross on the forehead with moistened ash, they were to sprinkle dry ash on the crown of the head, following a long-established custom in Rome. Holy water should not be added to the ash before the sprinkling.

Subsequently, a surge of cases on 27 February 2020 marked the second wave of Covid-19 in Malaysia. On 4 March 2020, the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur issued a chancery notice for the immediate suspension of penitential services. It reiterated that persons who were ill should not attend Mass, meetings, or gatherings that involved close contact with others, and that the elderly, the sick, and the vulnerable were exempted from Mass obligations. They were encouraged to follow online Masses and practise spiritual communion. Hand sanitisers were to be placed at church entrances and chapels, and those who had travelled to

countries that had high numbers of infection cases should observe a 14-day self-quarantine from the date of return to Malaysia. On 5 March 2020, a parishioner from the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Puchong (OLG) was confirmed positive for Covid-19. Subsequently, two other parishioners, who had been in close contact with the first case from OLG were also tested positive. The parish priest from OLG was tested negative but went into self-isolation for 14 days as a precautionary measure. The church was also cleaned and sanitised in compliance with safety protocols and standards.

The worsening Covid-19 situation in Malaysia led the Catholic Church in Peninsular Malaysia to suspend all Masses as well as other public gatherings from 14 March 2020. The Catholic faithful were given dispensation from their Sunday obligation to attend Masses and encouraged to follow online Masses as a form of "spiritual devotion". Catechism classes, programmes and activities, as well as meetings, gatherings, formations, Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) sessions, fellowships, and events in churches and Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) were also cancelled. Weddings or funerals could be conducted privately with limited guests, while the Sacraments of Penance, Anointing of the Sick, and Holy Communion for the homebound could be conducted only if there was prior appointment with the parish priest, who would have to take necessary health precautions. Churches, chapels, and prayer rooms could remain open for private and personal prayer and Eucharistic adoration according to times scheduled by the respective parishes. Priests were still required to offer private Masses for the Church and her faithful.

The Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur and Bishops of Penang and Melaka Johor understood that their decision would cause distress to many of their flock, but they believed, based on the experiences of other countries, that social distancing, which included shutting down of all mass gatherings of individuals, would prevent further transmission of the virus. The measures were also in accordance with the Ministry of Health's recommendations on 11 March 2020 to postpone all mass gatherings.

On 16 March 2020, the Malaysian government announced the Restriction of Movement Control Order (MCO) under the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988 and Police Act 1967 with effect from 18 March 2020. One of the effects of this was the closure and cessation of activities in all places of worship. On 17 March 2020, Archbishop Leow issued a pastoral care directive to comply with the Malaysian government's MCO. Churches, chapels, and parish offices were to be closed and staff were to work from home. However, parishes were to make available emergency hotlines for those who required pastoral care and support. Sacraments of Penance, Anointing of the Sick, and Holy Communion were only for critical cases. Preparation and celebration of the RCIA scrutinies were deferred and the Chrism Mass schedule for 31 March 2020 was cancelled. Archbishop Leow also called on BECs to collaborate with their parish's Integral Human Development ministry to support and care for those affected by the pandemic, for example, the elderly, sick, those living alone, others who have been financially affected and family members of frontline healthcare providers. On 25 March 2020, the

Catholic Bishops of Malaysia decided that the liturgical celebrations of Holy Week would be conducted by priests privately without the congregation, in view of the extended Movement Control Order. The Catholic faithful were invited to prayerfully follow online Masses from home and continue making spiritual communion.

For the Catholic faithful, the suspension of physical Masses was unprecedented. Even during the Aggiornamento or "Priestless August" in 1976, when the entire clergy of Peninsular Malaysia went on a month's retreat, the faithful could still receive Holy Communion in churches. The suspension of Masses and closure of Church activities and premises had a huge impact on the Catholic community in Peninsular Malaysia. While some had mixed feelings about the decision, most were supportive and felt that the Archbishop and Bishops were prudent in taking proactive measures to protect the safety of their flock. Rachael, a retiree, said that she was not surprised by the announcement of the suspension of Masses as the number of cases was alarmingly high at that point in time. She added, "I guess it was inevitable that we would have to follow the Government's directives."

Elizabeth (pseudonym), a writer, said that the bishops acted coherently and swiftly, particularly within the context of the initial case reported in the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe. In fact, she mentioned that her non-Catholic friend expressed admiration for the decisiveness of the Catholic Church in suspending Masses even before the government's decision to impose the MCO. However, Elizabeth also had mixed feelings because she was not able to physically attend Mass to receive the sacraments.

Writers Devid and Vanitha, in their 50s, also felt the sense of loss, especially during Lent and Holy Week, where traditionally Catholics would attend the Triduum Masses. They were also part of a perpetual adoration group for Lent and they felt the sense of loss for not being able to physically pray together with the others before the Blessed Sacrament. However, they understood that the decision was made for the greater good of the community, especially to protect the weaker and more vulnerable parishioners.

"Online Masses" were the only way for the Catholic community in Peninsular Malaysia to pray together virtually during the MCO. A.L., a trainer, said that because everyone was on lockdown and could not go out, "online Masses" helped people to keep connected to their faith and not feel spiritually cut off. In fact, she attends "online Masses" every day. Many Catholics also attended livestream Masses from all over the world, for example, Singapore, the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States (via EWTN), Vatican City, and even Dubai. Rachael said, "In fact, I think we Catholics were 'spoilt for choice'. Not only did we have our own telecast, we were able to have access to Masses worldwide for those parishes who chose to broadcast them."

Marianne, an accounting systems trainer, said that the experience made her realise that the Catholic Church was truly universal. She said, "I also get a chance to 'travel' every week to different churches around the world. It is truly a blessing to be able to have this opportunity." Those "Online Mass" also helped Marianne improve her spirituality and deepen her relationship with

God as she was able to participate, reflect, and meditate during the Masses without being distracted. Furthermore, "online Masses" had camera close-ups of the priests' actions, so Marianne also used this as a teaching opportunity for her daughter, who would be receiving her First Holy Communion at the end of the year. "We now have a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Mass," she said.

Edmund, a businessman, felt that online Masses could reach out to others, especially non-Catholics, who might not have the opportunity to observe and "experience" Mass because of possible discomfort with stepping foot into a church. He believed that the internet has broken this barrier and online Masses were part of evangelisation. "Jesus used to preach going from village to village. Now, we can use technology to do that," said Edmund, who added that "online Masses" could also help to reach out and reconnect lapsed Catholics back to the Church. A.L., the other interviewee, concurred that technology helps to transcend physical and geographical barriers. "We can go anywhere in the world and save time because we don't have to physically travel there," she added.

Elizabeth (pseudonym) was also able to follow the online Masses and livestream of Adoration and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament during MCO, but she felt this could not substitute being physically present before the tabernacle and receiving the Holy Eucharist. Furthermore, despite living in the city, her internet connection was intermittent and unstable sometimes due to the high volume of users. She said, "If I was having problem accessing livestream online Masses, imagine rural communities, those from

the lower-income background, or the elderly and homebound with no one nearby to assist them. So, I am not sure if livestream online connected most Catholics to the Holy Mass. It would be good to get data from the ground…online analytics don't tell the whole story."

Moreover, after a while, the excitement of online Mass tapered off. A.L. felt a disconnect and it became difficult to give due reverence in front of the Blessed Sacrament during online Mass. "It is different when one is physically in church. The ambiance of being on sacred ground creates an atmosphere of reverence which can't be replicated in an 'online Mass' setting." Devid also felt the loss of not being able to pray physically before the Blessed Sacrament; he missed worshipping together as a community and the fellowship with others. Rachael also felt disconnected during "online Mass". "I stay alone, so having to kneel and stand in front of a screen and making the sign of peace to no one seems weird. I miss worshipping as a community...and not being able to go for Confession and Holy Communion was really depressing." Going for too many "online Masses" and faith formation around the world also led to an information overload for A.L., causing her to lose focus. She decided to be more discerning, choosing topics that she felt were relevant to her, prioritising quality over quantity, and focusing on faith formation that helped her to deepen her spirituality such as an Ignatian online retreat organised in India.

Other than "online Masses", the Catholic community in Peninsular Malaysia found creative ways to connect and pray together through various platforms such as Zoom, YouTube,

WhatsApp and Facebook Live. New technology enabled the organisation of rosary devotions and rallies, novenas, livestream Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, Stations of the Cross, bible study, and faith formation sessions. Elizabeth (pseudonym) managed to participate in two virtual conferences – the Theology of the Body Conference and the Eucharistic Congress – held over weekends. She also accessed Catholic podcasts and videos through online platforms such as https://formed.org/, Catholics@Home, www.regnumchristi.org, and Bishop Robert Barron's www.wordonfire.org. Edmund said that he and his mother received daily gospel messages and sermons in Mandarin via WhatsApp, and his mother could now attend daily Mass through YouTube without the hassle of having to drive to church and find parking. Devid also attended an online healing rally organised by a Catholic church in Australia.

Meanwhile, Marianne helped to coordinate a virtual choir with a Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC) group. The BEC members in Malaysia, as well as their children and grandchildren overseas, recorded their singing and sent the files over to Marianne, who compiled and processed them into a YouTube video. She said, "Most of the BEC members are the elderly who live on their own in Malaysia. Having overseas family and relatives participating in this project helped them to connect and made the situation less lonely during the lockdown."

For many Catholics in Peninsular Malaysia, one of the main sources of information was the Kuala Lumpur Archdiocese website (https://www.archkl.org/). The Archdiocese's Office for Social

Communications arranged to broadcast Masses online in various major languages over the weekends and in English for weekday Masses. The Archdiocese also created a special page with relevant information and guidance pertaining to the Covid-19 outbreak in relation to the Catholic Church (https://archkl.org/index.php/archkl-announcement-news/175-coronavirus-covid-19). Links to online Masses could be found at https://www.archkl.org/index.php/tv-archkl-org, which was linked to the Kuala Lumpur Archdiocese's YouTube channel https://www.youtube.com/c/ArchklOrg that also contained various webinars and faith formation videos. Those who wanted the Mass readings of the day and hymn lyrics for the weekend Masses could access https://archkl.org/index.php/tv-archkl-org. In addition, there were podcasts of daily reflections, homilies, and faith formation sessions to support the Catholic faithful such as https://soundcloud.com/archkl/sets. Herald Malaysia, a Catholic weekly newspaper, went fully online during the MCO through its website (http://www.heraldmalaysia.com/).

The lockdown period also saw the emergence of new online media outlets to cater to the rise in the Malaysian Catholic community who were looking for spiritual nourishment during the suspension of Masses in churches. One such example was Catholics@Home, a podcast discussion on daily issues and trending topics from a Catholic perspective, which could be found on Facebook and YouTube. Started by the Rev. Fr Dr Clarence Dass, head of the Catholic Research Centre in Kuala Lumpur, and hosted by Kevin Francis and Mark Darren Lee, the aim was to help the Malaysian Catholic community under lockdown to "understand, prepare and tackle being an online Catholic". In an interview with

Herald Malaysia in April 2020, Fr Clarence said, "One week into the MCO, I was speaking to a former altar server and he suggested we do something to keep ourselves occupied. Since there were already many 'instructional materials' online, we decided on something conversational. He enlisted another friend and we worked on topics we felt would interest people, especially during the MCO. Our podcast's title is to reflect where Catholics are during the MCO…at home." Another media resource readily available was MyJoysComplete!, an audio podcast by Joyce Stellus, who gives her take on daily scripture readings from a linguistic and theological approach. This can be found on anchor.fm, which is owned by Spotify, and Apple podcasts.

Meanwhile, Mandarin-speaking Catholics could access Catholics Go Live! which had video content in Mandarin on its YouTube channel as well as Facebook page. Luke Lee, who founded the online resource with several collaborators, said that they were aware that Mandarin-speaking Catholics had shallow knowledge about their faith, especially the younger people. Furthermore, everyone could not go to church during the lockdown. Therefore, they wanted to make information on the Catholic faith accessible to people. Luke said, "We decided to create this channel on YouTube, firstly to address issues during the pandemic and to keep people in touch with their faith. Secondly, we wanted to create Catholic content to establish an online presence."

Luke added, "We started by inviting priests to share on how we could keep our eyes on Jesus during this pandemic. From there, we expanded to a variety of topics which are faith-related." The

YouTube channel and Facebook page contained upcoming talks and sharing, as well as graphics on some special feast days. He said, "Our objective is to be a channel that provides faith information and sharing for the Mandarin-speaking community. We hope to be the one-stop channel for people to know and explore more of the Catholic Faith in the Mandarin language."

Older websites such as Journey with Us – Asia (https://www.journeywithus.asia/), established in June 2019, found that online traffic increased during MCO as Malaysian Catholics scoured the internet for information. Founders Devid and Vanitha said that during the lockdown, people received all kinds of WhatsApp messages which caused confusion. Thus, they decided to collate information on the different "online Masses" that were available. Based on their website server analytics, they found that news and information about "online Masses" were highly sought after, and they were happy that their efforts paid off to serve the Catholic faithful.

As the Covid-19 situation improved, the Malaysian government announced the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) in June. Places of worship could now operate for the faithful to pray together but under strict Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Only a certain number of parishioners could attend Masses with prior registration so that physical distancing could be observed. Those who managed to physically attend Masses said that it was truly an emotional experience. A.L. and Marianne both said that it felt like "coming home" to see Jesus. Rachael added, "I didn't realise how much I missed Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament,

truly present in the tabernacle, and not just looking at a screen!" Edmund, however, felt that the Covid-19 situation was still unsafe and had opted to continue to attend "online Masses".

When asked about the pros and cons, as well as the use of new technology on the Catholic faith and liturgical practices in the future, A.L. felt that livestream Masses should continue for the elderly, sick, bedridden, and homebound who were physically unable to be in church for Masses as it provided a spiritual connection for them. Molly, who was recovering from dengue, added that she would still use technology as she was able to receive links on daily readings and homilies from friends.

Nevertheless, there were also concerns that once the Covid-19 pandemic subsided and the situation reverted to normal, livestream Masses would become a "new normal" for the Catholic community in Malaysia. Elizabeth (pseudonym) expressed concern that once the dispensation for Sunday Mass obligation was lifted, and the Catholic faithful were called to return to regular Sunday Mass in church, there would be a number who preferred to stay home and "attend Masses" virtually since they have got used to the convenience. Paul, a consultant, also had similar concerns, observing that not many young people had been attending Mass in church even though it had already resumed for a few weeks. A.L. agreed that that it was possible for people to become complacent after getting used to attending "online Masses" for a few months.

In Rachael's opinion, new technology had enabled people to "feel" connected with their loved ones and the community around

them, despite having to stay at home during the MCO. She noted that many parishes and religious communities had used social media to organise online religious seminars, faith formation, and conferences on topics ranging from catechetics, theology, liturgy, and even retreats. Rachael managed to participate in some of these sessions and found that many of them were edifying and instructive. "However virtual communities can never replace physical presence in a faith community. As sacramental people, we need to engage our five senses to connect to God and interact with our faith community as members of the body of Christ," she explained. Elizabeth (pseudonym) agreed, saying that technology could never replace the Real Presence of Jesus Christ, who was truly and substantially present as Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity in the Blessed Sacrament at the altar. She added, "Through the sacraments, Christ makes Himself present to us in person…Jesus is not virtual…We cannot and will never receive Him virtually. To attempt to do this is to reduce Him (God) to our image and likeness – worship of God at our convenience."

In Rachael's view, technology can be used for faith formation, for example, by organising online seminars and conferences, but it should never replace the actual Mass or praying in a community. This was echoed by Elizabeth (pseudonym) who said, "Technology can be used to supplement or complement efforts to deliver matters of faith, but it should never be used to substitute or replace the physical celebration of the sacraments: Presence matters. Both the faithful and the sacraments must be present. What we had during MCO was merely a temporary stop-gap measure; it can never be a 'new normal' for the church."

FAITH AND FAMILY IN THE TIME OF COVID-19: THE REVIVAL OF THE DOMESTIC CHURCH AND CATHOLIC DEVOTIONS AND TRADITIONS IN HOMES AMIDST A PANDEMIC

by Melissa Shamini Perry

PRELUDE

In the year 2020, in a distant kingdom, there appeared a strange, invisible, dangerous monster that devoured human lives by the thousands. Day by day, the monster grew stronger and wrecked terror and devastation in every corner of the kingdom claiming lives and livelihoods and could not be defeated by even the kingdom's wisest and valiant knights. The people were terrified and lived in fear of being the monster's next victim. Although the monster could not be slain, the leaders of the kingdom took extreme measures to defend and protect the people from the devastation it caused. They ordered people to cover their faces, stay home and not gather with friends and relatives. The people could not travel, take holidays or reunite with distant family. Each and every movement of the people was tracked and those found defying these orders were punished. Many people thought that the leaders were right and did all they could to protect themselves and those around them but there were people from other parts of the kingdom who did not believe the monster existed and refused to abide by the rules enforced to combat the monsters and continued to do as they liked; even as the monster continued to take more and more human lives as the days passed.

As a lockdown decree was passed in the land, the people were forced to stay in their homes and the kingdom came to a standstill. Only the valiant knights were allowed out to continue their battle against this monster and help those it had attacked. Schools and playgrounds were empty, devoid of the laughter and shouts of joy of children. Workplaces and streets echoed an eerie silence and churches, mosques, and temples reverberated no longer with prayer, sacred music, and chants. Weddings, birthdays, festivals, and celebrations were halted…it was a life unlike anything the people had ever known.

However, the people remained resilient and found ways and means to ensure life went on even within the four corners of their rooms or homes. They worked, rested, read books, made art, cooked and baked, played, and prayed. They spent more time with themselves, family, and God, and found new ways of thinking and being. They learned and discovered more about themselves, each other, and about the world. Cloistered at home, some began to smile, laugh, and hug more, and found greater joy, peace, and love. However, there were those who cried, wept, and endured further pain, anger, sorrow, and difficulty at losing their income, being confined to small spaces or deprived of love and support from others. The threat of the monster looming all around the kingdom affected all lives, young and old, king and peasant, rich and poor. As the fight to defeat the monster continued, everyone did their part and waited in hope for the day the monster would be vanquished. However, until that day would come, people put their

trust in God and found new ways to continue living a meaningful and enriching life albeit one a bit different than they were used to.

BACKGROUND

Like the story above, the events of this year thus far have at times felt like they came from the pages of a dystopian novel or a scene from a sci-fi film. Unforeseen by all, it truly has been the case of life imitating art. In Malaysia, 2020 was meant to be a significant year, a year the nation had been waiting for since the 1990s. However, since its arrival, 2020 has been very different from our expectations of it, whether from a personal, social, or national perspective. For people like me, who grew up singing the Vision 2020 song, "*Wawasan dua puluh dua puluh….satu pandangan jauh*," ("*Vision 2020… a far-sighted vision*") in school, 2020 was meant to be the materialisation of that distant vision unimaginable in our childhood. In the context of the nation, it was meant to be "the" year for Malaysia to have marked its achievement of fair distribution of wealth and the status of a truly developed nation in every way. Sadly, this has not materialised for Malaysia and that vision and goal remain a distant dream. Instead, the year 2020 ushered in a global pandemic, unlike anything experienced in our lifetime, which has impacted us all in more ways than one.

It would be difficult to think of any aspect of our lives that has been untouched and unchallenged by the effects of this global pandemic and the measures put in place to combat it. As so aptly put by His Holiness Pope Francis, due to the pandemic, "illness, suffering, fear, and isolation challenge us. The poverty of those who die alone, the abandoned, those who have lost their jobs and

income, the homeless, and those who lack food challenge us" [1]. The pandemic has hit every corner of the world and society. No one has been spared the threat of this virus, neither the rich and famous nor the strong and powerful. Royalties, prime ministers, athletes, pop stars, celebrities, and members of the medical fraternity have contracted the virus together with millions of people all over the world. The battle to combat this pandemic continues worldwide, but in the meantime, we as individuals and members of the community continue to find ways to cope and maintain a sense of normalcy in these unprecedented times.

The pandemic has not only affected the way in which we dress, eat, and move, but also the way we work, learn, play, and pray. Personal protective equipment, face masks, face shields, hand sanitisers, disinfectants, thermometers, and QR codes have become indispensable elements in our daily lives. Information and digital technology have played a very big part in how we have tried to maintain a sense of normalcy in terms of work, study, and communication. Many have been forced to learn to use technology in ways they did not have to and for purposes that did not exist before the pandemic. Teaching and learning, meetings, seminars, and workshops, and finally, worship, prayer, and Masses are all being conducted virtually or online through various internet sites, mobile platforms, and applications.

Parents and children, teachers and students, employers and employees, as well as the priests and the lay faithful have all had to find ways of staying connected to their learning, work, and faith through the means offered by these technological applications. We

certainly have had to immerse ourselves in the virtual world and spend more screen time than we have ever had to before. However, it is undeniable that even in this age, access to technology and the benefits it offers especially during the pandemic lockdown can only be enjoyed by those who can afford digital devices and services and by those with adequate technical knowledge to use them accordingly. Those who cannot not gain access to those technological devices and services are unable to make use of the resources that have been made available.

However, as technology makes its presence and significance greatly felt in our lives, it is heartening to observe that it has not consumed us entirely as people have also turned to traditional ways of being and doing throughout these times. While some began to tutor themselves on how to navigate Zoom, Google Hangout, Meets, Classroom, and other online applications (during the pandemic), there were those who took to refining traditional skills such as cooking, baking, sewing, gardening, woodworking, and painting. The social media sites became digital repositories and virtual archives where people documented and shared their newfound hobbies and creations that both inspired and also drew admiration from others.

Through all this, the home has truly taken centre stage and has been the place for us to work, learn, play, and pray. For many 21st-century urban families prior to the pandemic lockdown, the home had morphed from a domestic sanctuary into a private bed and breakfast from which parents and children rushed out in a hurry at sunrise and to which they returned stressed and tired at sunset

to head straight to bed. Weekends too were filled with various activities outside the home. Many of us living in cities are accustomed to eating out and exercising at gyms or health centres and are involved in various leisure, social, as well as religious activities outside of the home. We spend very few waking hours in the house and even less hours enjoying quality time with our family members. Although this was not the ideal way of life many of us would have preferred to lead, it was so due to the demands of having to earn a livelihood and provide good and comfortable lives for our families. The consequence of this hectic lifestyle, however, was that our houses were no longer homes for families but merely accommodations for busy individuals. The Covid-19 pandemic that hit us this year has most definitely changed our way of life. It has made us question our past practices and priorities, and perhaps brought positive changes to our domestic lives.

The lockdown, or the Movement Control Order (MCO) as it is known in Malaysia, has forced us to spend almost every hour of our day at home throughout the past few months. For many of us, it would have been the first time in a very long while that we would have spent that amount of time not only in our homes but also in the presence of our family members. Although many of us knew that this confinement was temporary, not knowing how long it would last was challenging and had an effect on our well-being. For the extraverted, active, social, and outdoorsy type, this confinement was especially challenging. It brought renewed admiration and also a sense of empathy for those who were homebound, home makers, the elderly, and domestic workers who spend most of their hours in the house on a daily basis.

As families began to spend more time at home and with each other than they had ever done before, many began to have a renewed appreciation for their homes and each other. Consequently, many made efforts to rebuild, repair or enhance their houses and their relationships to make their homes and their families the sanctuary it was meant to be. As the home become a multifunctional space for work, school, and worship, many of us dedicated areas in our homes to enhance the working, learning and praying experience at this time.

FAITH AT HOME

For many Catholics, the church is the place where we congregate for our faith and worship and where we seek spiritual nourishment and rejuvenation. The Mass is a core aspect of our religious practice and we attend Mass in communion with all our fellow Catholic brothers and sisters as one united family of faith. At Mass in church, we are immersed in the rich tradition of Catholic worship that stimulates all our five senses and nourishes our body, mind, and spirit. As soon as we step into church, the spectrum of lights shining through the stained glass windows, the cool touch of the holy water, the smell of the wafting incense, and the serene silence of quiet prayer transports us from the noisy, hectic world outside into the peace and calm of the sacred space. As Mass begins, the chimes of the ringing church bell, the music from the organ, songs and chants of the choir, the changing liturgical colours of the altar linens and the liturgical attires worn by the clergy from week to week, and the feel and taste of the precious Body of Christ placed on our palms or tongues, are all part of the multisensorial

experience that engulfs our senses and transports us to a spiritual plane where we can feel rejuvenation of mind, body, and spirit.

The beauty of a Catholic Mass and liturgy celebrated in the sacred space of the church is truly an extraordinary form of worship that provides us with the spiritual nourishment we seek as children of God which cannot be replicated in any other form or manner. The uniqueness of the Mass is also that it is a form of worship that is performed as a community of believers and not as individuals. By going to church for Mass, not only do we receive spiritual nourishment and rejuvenation but also social engagement and familial Christian solidarity through social interaction with family and other members of the parish community in the form of fellowship and interactions on the church grounds after Mass. In this way, the church is instrumental in maintaining the mental, spiritual, and social wellbeing of members of its community. This is possibly why the closure of churches in order to curb the spread of the Covid-19 virus nationwide has had a significant impact on the mental and spiritual wellbeing of many members of its faith community.

When Malaysia was placed under the MCO on 18 March 2020, the bishops of Peninsular Malaysia decided and promulgated in a pastoral letter that all weekend and weekday Masses, catechism classes, meetings, gatherings, faith formation sessions, RCIA classes (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults), fellowships, and events in the church, and BEC gatherings (Basic Ecclesial Communities) be suspended and churches, chapels, archdiocesan, and parish offices be closed [2]. During this period, the bishops dispensed the Catholic faithful from fulfilling their Sunday obligation of assisting at

or attending Mass and invited them to follow the televised private masses from their homes and continue making spiritual communion [3].

This closure of churches and suspension of Masses and sacraments had a significant impact on the lives of the Catholic faithful in Peninsular Malaysia and was cause for much concern, sadness, and frustration. It had also brought a renewed appreciation for the privileges of daily and weekend Masses enjoyed by many of the Catholics in urbans areas which might have been taken for granted previously. As stated by His Holiness, Pope Francis, "the impossibility of gathering as a church to celebrate the Eucharist has led us to share the experience of the many Christian communities that cannot celebrate Mass every Sunday" [4].

Nevertheless, not being able to go to church, attend Mass, or partake in faith formations and church activities left many members of the Catholic community feeling uncertain, worried, and lost. Michael Ananth, a member of his parish's media and communications ministry, expressed that the closure of the churches was the biggest challenge he faced during the MCO. "Not being able to hear God's word read or preached and receive the sacrament in the way that we are used to…It was an unsettling time for me," said Michael. According to youth leader Jerome Yuen, "being practically banned from receiving the sacraments was a really bad and sad thing." As noted by Michael and Jerome, being deprived of the sensorial experience of hearing the scriptures proclaimed and physically receiving the Holy Eucharist in the church had an emotional impact and affected their experience of

participating in worship. This was something that they felt could not be replaced by "online masses".

The church closure also posed challenges for Catholic families and their spiritual growth and well-being. As shared by Arul Anthony, a BEC coordinator, "I was very concerned about my faith and that of my family, especially since we were not able to attend Mass or even enter the church." Even though there was Mass televised online every Sunday and later daily, the digital divide was a challenge for those unable to watch those "online Masses" due to lack of access to digital devices and internet services. Those with good internet connection in their homes were more fortunate than others. As noted by Jerome Yuen, "The first week without Mass was a saddening experience, but fortunately in my house, the network and the TV didn't present any problem for us to view the 'online Masses'". Although the live streamed Masses could not provide the same experience as attending Mass at church, it did provide many Catholics with some form of spiritual nourishment and the opportunity to continue their faith practices albeit in a different form and manner. Mother of three, Annabel Francis, expressed, "When the MCO officially started on the 18 March 2020, we had to watch live streamed Masses. In the beginning, it was not easy and we missed going for Mass as a family." As shared by Arul and Annabel, not having access to praying and going to Mass in the sacred space of the church or chapel did affect Catholic individuals and families quite a bit. It was especially difficult as it happened during Lent, a time when everyone was physically, mentally, and spiritually preparing for the joyful celebration of Christ's resurrection on Easter Sunday. For those who were used to religiously observing all the

devotions during Lent, not being able to go to church for the Way of The Cross, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday left them very empty and lost.

However, God's providence saw us at this time being presented with the perfect opportunity to have a truly experiential and immersive journey of Lent towards Holy Week and Easter. Instead of having to give up the usual meat, alcohol, or desserts, we had to face the literal deprivation of social gatherings, eating out, external entertainment, and also the deprivation of physically receiving the Body of Christ and worshipping God as a community of believers. We had to embrace isolation, boredom, powerlessness, insecurity and fear of scarcity, loss of income, illness, and even death. As shared by Michael, "It was more frightening living in this outbreak when everything seemed uncertain and we were all being locked in our homes. At that moment, I pondered why this was happening, and whether this was the end. Would I ever meet my family and friends again? Would I ever to go to church again? I wanted this pandemic to end so that I could return to my normal life." Many of us can relate to the thoughts and fears expressed by Michael as we too struggled with the uncertainties and threats posed by the pandemic.

In many ways, through the isolation, pain, and fear that the MCO brought to our lives, we had the opportunity to glimpse into the experiences and feelings Christ himself would have encountered on his journey to Calvary. The symbolic motifs of our Catholic faith so prominent every Holy Week had become all the more relevant at this time. The MCO truly felt like the burden of a

heavy cross that we all had to carry as we faced the various trials and tribulations the pandemic brought to us, our families, our nation, and the world.

The pandemic has brought so many changes to our lives and has significantly affected our family life and the way we practice our faith as Catholic families. However, like humanity has done in times of change and difficulty since the beginning of time, Catholics have also adapted, evolved, and found new ways of keeping our faith, religious practices, and traditions alive to fuel the growth and enrichment of our spirituality. His Holiness Pope Francis reminded us that this time of "being forced to observe social distancing and to stay at home invites us to rediscover that we need social relationships as well as our communal relationship with God" [5]. Although the pandemic had shut the doors to the churches, it opened the doors and windows of the domestic church through which we could welcome the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit into our hearts and homes.

The Second Vatican Council's "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" states that "the family, is so to speak, the domestic church" (*Lumen Gentium* 11). According to Pope Paul VI, to truly become a domestic church, "there should be found in every Christian family the various aspects of the entire church" [6]. "The family is indeed the way of the church because it is the 'human space' of our encounter with Christ" said Pope Benedict XVI in his address to the Pontifical Council for the Family [7]. In his message on 13 November 2019, Pope Francis emphasised that "the family is a domestic church where faith grows" and quoted St Paul (1 Corinthians 16:19)

on *domus ecclesiae*, a "house of the church" as a place in which to listen to the Word of God and celebrate the Eucharist" [8]. In the past, these domestic churches existed so that Christians could continue to meet, pray, and celebrate the Eucharist in countries without religious freedom [9]. At the present time of the Covid-19 pandemic, due to the closure of churches and chapels all over the world, there is a greater need for Christian families to become the domestic church where they can continue to welcome Christ and grow in faith. At this time, as so profoundly expressed by the Pope, our "families have become the temple for the Eucharist" and our homes domestic churches where we pray and participate virtually in the Eucharistic celebration and spiritual communion [10].

The closure of public workspaces, educational institutions, and places of worship during the MCO saw a rare phenomenon of family members spending their time at home with one another all day and night. Through discussions with Catholics in Malaysia, I was able to learn a lot about the different ways in which individuals and families embraced active roles in keeping their faith alive for themselves and their families and was able to witness a true revival of the domestic church in our community in Malaysia. I learned from the Catholics I interviewed, that the time they shared together as a family during the MCO period provided them the opportunity to come together and grow in faith in a way they never did before.

As noted by Michael Ananth, "The church has taught us from its earliest days that each family among the faithful is a domestic church. It is in the family that people of all ages are brought to faith in Jesus Christ and grow in relationship with him. A family is a

channel of grace, to each other, grow in holiness, both in the ordinary daily interactions and in the larger challenges". Like Michael, many drew strength and sought comfort from their families and their faith during these troubled times. He shared,

> Falling back to the basics like praying the rosary, the chaplet of Divine Mercy, the daily offering, the Angelus, and other traditional prayers gave me the strength to carry on and to believe that we would go through this pandemic. My relationship with God grew stronger during the crisis leaning heavily upon the love of Christ. My heart overflowed with joy when I joined together again with my loved ones around the altar for daily prayer. Returning to my faith during the uncertain times has brought me closer to God.

In addition to attending "online Mass" together, many Catholic families took this opportunity during the MCO period to strengthen their family unit and faith by initiating or reviving family prayer times, rosary recitations, scripture reflections, and also establishing new traditions for Lent, Easter, and other church feasts and celebrations.

"ONLINE MASS" AT HOME

During the MCO, many families began the custom of taking an active role in preparing the spaces in their homes for participating in "online Masses" together. At the usual Sunday Masses in churches before the pandemic, with the exception of those animating the liturgy, lay members of the congregation would

play a largely passive role in Mass preparations. Now, with the streaming of Masses online, the laity were strongly encouraged to prepare their homes and worship spaces before watching "online Mass". Information was circulated online and through social media, educating families how to prepare themselves and their homes for attendance of "online Mass". To do this, the Catholic symbols and materials such as the Crucifix, the Holy Bible, candles, incense, and altar cloths became important and many families took this Mass preparation seriously. As shared by Jerome Yen, "Our coffee table, which seats right in front of the TV, would be cleared out of all the foodstuffs laying on it, wiped clean, and a Benedictine cross would be put standing in the centre. We would all dress up in our Sunday best even though we were at home."

Jessica Tan shared the steps she and her family took to preserve the solemnity of Sunday Mass even while participating at home in Masses being telecasted:

> During this time of Covid-19, I made it a point that we participated in the "online Mass" as though we were at Mass. I felt that it was a very important aspect in keeping the faith alive! Many times, I see and hear of friends who would just lie in bed or sit on the couch the whole time during Mass. But I believed that it was so important for us to pray with our whole bodies, even though we were not physically in a church building, to pray in our homes as though we were there, so my parents and I would kneel, stand, and bow. And in keeping reverence, my mum would also

> incense the house every Sunday, which I felt was a good initiative and reminder that while being far, we were near God who was also present in our homes.

For Jessica and her family, maintaining postures such as standing, kneeling, and sitting during the liturgy, even if they were not physically present at the church, was an important way of keeping reverence during the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. The incensing of the house further provided their home with an ambience experienced at church and helped them experience a more meaningful participation in the Mass. In my own family, my young children took a very active role in preparing the materials such as holy water, incense, the altar cloth, the candle, the Holy Bible, the crucifix, and preparing the altar table before we attended "online Mass". This became a routine they took very seriously and helped look forward to participating in "online Masses" at home every Sunday. It also prepared them better to sit through and be attentive during the "online Masses", which could be challenging for young children especially with the various distractions surrounding them in the house (unlike in the church).

Image 1: Preparing the table at home for online mass

In addition to participating in "online Masses", families were able to have more regular prayer times. Many of them explained that even after the MCO was lifted, they faithfully continued family prayer sessions that they had begun conducting during the MCO. Arul explained, "We had not been praying as a family mainly because my sons don't come home at the same time; sometimes they are late and we skip prayers. But during the MCO when we were all at home, we prayed every night without fail." Mary Wong shared that due to the MCO, "The rosary has become ever more present in my daily life, like a companion." As for Annabel, "During the month of May, we started praying the rosary as a family from Mondays to Fridays." These devotions and prayers like the rosary, the Divine Mercy chaplet, and novenas helped many families to come together in prayer and maintain the tradition of family prayer even after the MCO was lifted and churches gradually reopened.

Many Catholics who expressed how various Catholic materiality, symbols, and rituals took on a greater significance during the lockdown. Teresa Leung, who had amassed a collection of Catholic icons from pilgrimages and travels, remarked that she found herself gazing at them more than usual during the pandemic.

Image 2: Shrine set up by Teresa Leung

Carol Sebastian explained how she applied anointed oil to bless all the spaces in her home. As a result of being confined to their homes, many individuals saw significance in having a dedicated altar and prayer space within their homes. For example, as described by Jessica Tan,

> I created a sacred space in my room. I actually made a small altar and decorated it for my personal quiet times with God. Just having a small altar in my room where I can go to and be safe and be one with God has truly been very fulfilling. Some days when I remember, I'll bless myself with holy water. So I keep the faith alive by these practices.

Jerome explained how he used his time at home during the pandemic to carve out more time for prayer:

> It was also during this time that I tried to be more focused in my prayers, by keeping the intent of the prayers in my mind as I prayed them. If I was distracted…[I would] go back and say that part again. And since we were all stuck at home, I found a "spot" to say my prayers, which [was] at the foot of my bed, facing a crucifix hung on the wall.

The experiences shared by these individuals demonstrate the importance of Catholic symbols and materiality in creating the ambience of a sacred space to enhance our prayer life and worship in the domestic church.

Another element demonstrating the revival of the domestic church based on the sharing of the Catholic families I interviewed was their observation of Lent and Holy Week and the celebration of Easter in their homes. Every year, at the end of the Lenten period, during Holy Week and Easter, Catholics participate in a liturgy that is rich with symbols and rituals allowing us to completely immerse ourselves in the solemnity and deep significance of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection. This year, however, we were unable to have a first-hand experience of processing into the church with the palms on Palm Sunday, witnessing the washing of feet on Maundy Thursday, taking part in the veneration of the cross on Good Friday, or witnessing the glow of the Easter fire and the lighting of the Paschal candle, or feel the sprinkling of the holy water on our heads as we renewed our baptismal promises at the Easter Vigil.

Although denied these experiences in the churches, many Catholic families took a lot of effort to ensure that they were able recreate in their homes the spiritual solemnity that they received through the Catholic rituals and liturgical traditions conducted in church at Holy Week and Easter. Many families obtained palms and decorated their homes with them, placing them at their front doors and raised them up while participating in Palm Sunday Masses online. As is done in church during Holy Week (from after the Maundy Thursday Mass up to the Easter Vigil), in many homes, families covered their sacred images and statues at home.

On Maundy Thursday, in the homes of Jerome, Michael and many others, families took turns washing the feet of their family

members. According to Ivan and Jenny Ngoh, their family started with a prayer, sang a hymn, read a passage from the scripture and then washed the feet of each other with a hymn playing in the background. For Ivan and Jenny, it was the first time they had done the washing of the feet with their sons and commented that it would be a tradition that they would like to continue annually on Maundy Thursday. In my family, in addition to the washing of the feet, we re-enacted the Last Supper with our children as we prepared and shared a simple meal with each other in order to have an immersive experience of the very first mass. Doing this for the first time this year, enabled the children to have a better understanding of the significance of the mass and the events leading to Christ's death on Good Friday.

Image 3: The Table set up for the re-enactment of The Last Supper and Washing of the Feet

On Good Friday, many participated in the telecasted Stations of the Cross and Good Friday Service and also venerated the crosses in their homes. Similarly, many families observed the tradition of turning all the lights off in their homes while participating in the Easter Vigil online and also sprinkling holy water in every room of their house after the Easter Mass. Although the churches were closed and dark at Easter for the first time in recent memory, the domestic churches in the Catholic community shone bright as we, the faithful, found ways to let the light of the risen Christ into our homes and hearts. In their own different ways during this pandemic, the Catholic families in our community had embraced the spirit of the early Christians and tried to keep the Catholic faith alive in times of uncertainty. In doing so, they laid stronger foundations to build strong domestic churches that could withstand anything that might come their way.

CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic, the MCO, and the resulting closure of churches and suspension of Masses has affected the ways in which Catholic individuals and families have practiced their faith and consequently contributed to the revival of the domestic church. For many, the significance and the meaning that they derived from the traditions and rituals they have initiated at home due to the pandemic have led to a renewed commitment and an eagerness to uphold these customs on a regular basis. Many have expressed that taking an active role in using the Catholic symbols and performing the rituals in their homes have allowed them to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of our Catholic culture and

traditions. These steps taken by the Catholic families has demonstrated the commitment of these families towards keeping the rich traditions and rituals of the Catholic church alive in their domestic churches even after the pandemic is over. Therefore, like the promise of hope and salvation that awaited at the dawn of Easter, we continue to put our faith in the Lord and turn to Him for strength knowing that the risen Lord will raise us too, out of the darkness of this pandemic into the light of Christ.

Notes:

[1] Franciscus, "Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for World Mission Day 2020", *Vatican*, 31 May 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/missions/documents/papa-francesco_20200531_giornata-missionaria2020.html (accessed 3 September 2020).

[2] Kuala Lumpur Archdiocesan Communications and Media Relations Office, "March 12 – Extracts of Pastoral Letter", 12 March 2020, https://archkl.org/index.php/archkl/archkl-announcement-news/181-march-12-extracts-of-pastoral-letter (accessed 3 September 2020).

[3] Most Rev. Julian Leow, "March 17 – Extracts of Pastoral Letter", 17 March 2020, https://archkl.org/index.php/archkl/archkl-announcement-news/188-march-17-extracts-of-pastoral-letter (accessed 3 September 2020).

[4] Franciscus, "Message of His Holiness".

[5] Franciscus, "Message of His Holiness".

[6] Knights of Columbus, *Building the Domestic Church* (New Haven, CT: Catholic Information Services, 2020).

[7] Knights of Columbus, *Building the Domestic Church*.
[8] Pope Francis, "Family is a domestic church where faith grows", *St Louis Review*, 21 November 2019, https://www.archstl.org/popes-message-family-is-a-domestic-church-where-faith-grows-4710 (accessed 3 September 2020).
[9] Pope Francis, "Family is a domestic church".
[10] Pope Francis, "Family is a domestic church".

ATTEMPTING TO MAKE SENSE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

by Ferdinand Purnomo, OCD

A WAKE-UP CALL TO REPENTANCE AND INTERCESSION

I personally believe that the COVID-19 global pandemic is a wake-up call for all the peoples of the world to recognise their (and our) sins, to have a "contrite heart and humbled spirit" before God, to "put our whole heart into following [God], into fearing [God] and seeking [God's] face once more" (cf. Daniel 3:25, 34-43). God does not cause people to sin, but God can do many things that people consider evil or bad, such as disease, plague, and calamity. Just look at the book of Exodus, for example. In the book of Job, Satan could send calamities to Job only because God gave Job into Satan's hands in order to test him. Throughout the book, Job would attribute his predicament to God, never to Satan.

Have you read a small little book called *Trustful Surrender to Divine Providence* [1]? It explains that God is in control of everything; there is no other god besides him who could do anything against his will. We have to surrender to God's will because it is always for a good purpose and directed towards the ultimate good. Here are some biblical quotations cited in the book:

> Isaiah 45:6-7 (RSV): "[6] that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none

besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. [7] I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things.

Deuteronomy 32:39 (RSV): "See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand."

1 Samuel 2:6-7 (RSV): "[6] The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. [7] The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts."

Amos 3:6 (RSV): "Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?"

Sirach 11:14 (RSV): "Good things and bad, life and death, poverty and wealth, come from the Lord."

While I do not deny the idea of divine chastisement/punishment, I find such terminology unhelpful with most people because it causes them to focus on God's wrath rather than on the response expected from human beings. Cardinal Reinhard Marx said that seeing the Coronavirus as God's punishment leads to a "very difficult and negative image of God" [2]. He must have forgotten Hebrews 12:5-6 (see the text in the New

Testament section below). When people focus on divine punishment, they tend to think that God is being unreasonable or unmerciful; they think that human beings do not deserve such a pandemic because we are innocent. They forget that human beings are sinners, that grave sins have been committed and continue to be committed, that human beings are destroying the world and many other good things that God has been creating, including life itself. Some examples of these are the New York celebration in Jan 2019 over the promulgation of state law permitting abortion up to birth, the years of sexual abuse of minors in the Catholic Church and complicit bishops, and the idol worship taking place during the Amazon Synod, among others. When people blame the devil for the global pandemic (because they think it is impossible for God to send such an evil thing), they unwittingly make God out to be a passive and distant observer of the world who is summoned by the prayers of the people to help medical workers and scientists do the "firefighting".

Instead, we should learn the correct response to any calamity from what the Bible reveals to us about how the prophets and other men and women of God responded to biblical calamities. Here are some examples from the Bible:

David repented after conducting a census of his people (cf. 2 Samuel 24:1-25);

The prayer of Azariah in the furnace (cf. Daniel 3, Catholic Edition only);

The prayer of Daniel (cf. Daniel 9:1-27);

Public confession of the people of Israel led by Nehemiah (cf. Nehemiah 9);

The martyrdom of the seven brothers (cf. 2Maccabees 7, especially v. 18);

The prayer of Esther (cf. Esther 4:17, Catholic Edition only).

In the above examples, none of them believed that they or their people were innocent. Also, none of them blamed the devil for those calamities. In fact, all of them recognised God as the ultimate source of those calamities. Even in the case of the exile, even though it was the Babylonians who invaded and destroyed Judah and Jerusalem, the elders of the Jews recognised that God was the ultimate cause: "But because our fathers had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia" (Ezra 5:12, RSV). However, recognising God as the ultimate cause of calamities does not mean blaming God. Instead, all of the above responses consist of turning to God in repentance, acknowledging human sins, begging God's mercy, and committing to be faithful to God again in the context of covenant relationship. This is the correct response to any calamity.

Turning to the New Testament, we find the following examples:

> Luke 13:4-5 (RSV): "Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? 5 I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."
>
> John 5:14 (RSV): "Afterward, Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, 'See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you.'"
>
> John 9:3 (RSV): "Jesus answered, 'It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him […]'."
>
> Hebrews 12:5-11 (RSV): "[…] 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are punished by him. 6 For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.' [Proverbs 3:11-12] […] 11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

From these examples, we learn that disaster or suffering can be a call to repentance. It can also be an occasion for the works of God to be manifest or an opportunity for other people to exercise charity

towards the afflicted persons. Finally, it can be the means by which the Lord disciplines us because He treats us as His children.

MORE THAN JUST A WAKE-UP CALL

More recently, N.T. Wright published a book *God and the Pandemic,* and he was interviewed by 100 Huntley Street [3]. He said that while sometimes the cause of suffering is sin (which requires a response of repentance), there are other times when the cause of suffering is not clear, in which case we should not play God and pretend to know the cause. In the current pandemic, both cases may be present: some may suffer due to their sins (for example, exploitation of wildlife or of the environment), while others may suffer the consequences of other people's sins. In the latter case, the one suffering should pray with the Psalms (for example, Psalm 88) to place their suffering before the Lord without expecting quick response, while those who are not yet suffering should seek to help those around them who are suffering.

POSITIVE EFFECTS

2 Chronicles 36:20-21 and Leviticus 26:33-35 link the exile with Israel's failure to keep the Sabbath.

> 2 Chronicles 36:20-21 (RSV): "He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword […] to fulfil the word of the LORD […] until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. […]"
>
> Leviticus 26:33-35 (RSV): "I will scatter you among the nations […] Then the land shall enjoy its sabbaths as

> long as it lies desolate, while you are in your enemies' land; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its sabbaths. As long as it lies desolate it shall have rest, the rest which it had not in your sabbaths when you dwelt upon it."

When we have a narrow perspective on global events and focus only on the effects such an event has on human health, freedom, and financial position, then something like the Covid-19 pandemic would be considered entirely evil. But if we consider also the environmental impact of the pandemic, it could actually be very good in that the whole world has cleaner air and water, birds and sea creatures can breathe more easily, even humans who usually suffer from the effects of air and water pollution are having the benefits of a cleaner environment. An article in Forbes on 11 Mar 2020 by a senior contributor Jeff McMahon says that the Covid-19 lockdown may save more lives by preventing pollution than by preventing infection [4].

Another positive effect of the coronavirus pandemic is the digital transformation of the way many businesses are done. A commentary in Channel News Asia on 20 Apr 2020 by Howard Yu pointed out that "What started as an innocent move to virtual meetings due to restrictions regarding social distancing has spearheaded an inexorable reform in how corporate decisions are made" [5]. This is because "[u]nlike in the past where most conference room conversations got lost, and what little was manually registered can be skewed, companies can now use digital technologies to find out which person provided the most insight to

projects, made the biggest contributions or distracted meetings from their objectives. Hiring, firing, and promoting can be done with more precision and with more objective measurement."

SUSPENDING PUBLIC MASSES AND CLOSING CHURCHES

Bishop Athanasius Schneider commented, "As long as supermarkets are open and accessible, and as long as people have access to public transportation, one cannot see a plausible reason for banning people from assisting at Holy Mass in a church. One can guarantee in churches the same and even better hygienic protective measures" [6]. However, we must also take heed of what Fr Mike Schmitz said in a Youtube video, "How Should Catholics Respond to the Coronavirus Pandemic? [7]":

1. It is a luxury to criticise other people's decision when we don't have the responsibility to make the decision;

2. Our sphere of interest is always bigger than our sphere of influence. We need to do what we can do given the current circumstances;

3. We should not lament the suspension of Masses. Instead, we can pray the Liturgy of the Hours, which is the official prayer of the Church.

WHY IS THERE SUFFERING AT ALL?

See Antonio Ducay, "A God Who Lets Things Happen? The Mystery of Evil and Suffering", *Opus Dei*, 31 March 2020, https://opusdei.org/en/document/a-god-who-lets-things-happen-mystery-of-evil-and-s/ (accessed 27 July 2020). Summary:

Evil Stems from Created Freedom

In bringing us into existence God "puts us to the test", entrusting us with the task of doing all the good we can. But often enough we do not do so, or even do the opposite: we freely choose to do what is wrong. Humanity has done so right from the beginning, ever since that decision of our first parents [called original sin], which became the fountainhead for all other evils. Everything evil in the world stems from a misguided use of freedom. Sin is the true evil we must fear. All the other evils in the world, in one way or another, stem from there.

Suffering as a Trial or Purification

It must however be noted that evil is not always the direct result of human guilt. When the good that should be present is lacking, evil appears. We suffer when we experience any absence of the good. In Sacred Scripture, the Book of Job shows us that the just and innocent suffer too. Job's suffering represents a trial to test his faith, from which he emerges greatly strengthened. Sometimes God tests us, but He always gives us his grace to win out and find a way to grow in love, which is the ultimate meaning of good.

In Moses' time, when the people were fickle and capricious, God purified them through a 40-year desert journey, guiding and teaching them until they were ready to enter the Promised Land. In our life, too, suffering can often lead to a change, a conversion, accompanied by an opening to others' needs. Then suffering also becomes part of God's "pedagogy". He does not want us to get lost on the way, wasting our time pursuing transient delights and worldly aims. God can turn this evil (suffering) into a means to attain our true good.

Suffering Inscribed in Nature

The fleeting nature of all creatures is observable in how they age and die. It can also be seen in the lack of harmony in nature, as well as in earthquakes and tsunamis that tear apart the very order of creation. These are sufferings that we cannot avoid or control; they are, as it were, inscribed in nature. Why does God permit disasters? One possible explanation is that, in God's creative plan, the destruction involved in natural evils and disasters bears some relationship to our freewill and our capacity to reject God, if only as an image of the harm that results when we separate ourselves from Him. With mankind, "the whole creation has been groaning in travail" (Romans 8:22), because creation too shares in God's creative and redemptive plan. Creation too "cherishes the hope of being freed from corruption and enabled to participate in the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).

Redemptive Suffering

The meaning of evil is fully illumined only by the Cross of Christ, and together with the Cross, the Resurrection. Christ's Cross shows us that suffering can be the sign and proof of love. Moreover, it can be the path to destroy sin. For it was on Jesus' Cross that God's love washed away the sins of the world. Sin has no resistance against the love that lowers itself and humiliates itself for the good of the sinner. On the Cross, Jesus' suffering is redemptive because his love for the Father and mankind does not recoil before human rejection and injustice. With His complete self-giving, He gave His life for sinners. Thus His Cross became the source of life for them. Our sufferings too can be redemptive, when they stem from love and are transformed by love. It is not suffering in itself that redeems, but the love that imbues it.

The Trump Card

Although evil is an evident reality in our life here on earth, God holds the "trump card". His is the final move in all that refers to each person's life. It is His all-powerful Love that is the world's true hope – a Love made manifest also in Christ's Resurrection. No matter how great and incomprehensible life's tragedies may be, the creative and re-creative power of God is much greater. Life is a time of testing; when it is over, what is definitive begins.

How Can We Help Those Who are Suffering?

Oftentimes we feel powerless when faced with the suffering of others and can only try to do what the good Samaritan did (cf.

Luke 10:25-37). We can offer our affection, listen sympathetically, and accompany; that is, we can refuse to "pass by on the other side" without showing any concern. But sometimes we too need to be healed because something has wounded us. Many people have felt God's caress precisely in their most difficult moments. These are opportunities for love to expand forcefully if God's grace is embraced, which restores dignity to even the most extreme situations.

Notes:

[1] Fr Jean Baptiste Saint-Jure SJ and Blessed Claude de la Colombière SJ, *Trustful Surrender to Divine Providence: The Secret of Peace and Happiness*, Paul Garvin, trans. (Charlotte, NC: Tan Books, 1984).

[2] Cameron Doody, "German, Austrian bishops insist coronavirus 'not God's punishment' but 'invitation to think'", *Novena*, 3 April 2020, https://novenanews.com/bishops-insist-coronavirus-not-gods-punishment/ (accessed 27 July 2020). His full reply in German can be found at https://www.merkur.de/lokales/muenchen/stadt-muenchen/reinhard-marx-per40473/kardinal-reinhard-marx-corona-keine-strafe-gottes-13608760.html (accessed 27 July 2020), and a lecture response by Fr Dominic Legge, OP, can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqzZ55OV1ys (accessed 27 July 2020).

[3] N.T. Wright, "Christian Reflection on Coronavirus, God & Early Christian Response to Suffering", Youtube Video, 12:41, 29

June 2020, https://youtu.be/cSCRD7tOVeg (accessed 27 July 2020).
[4] Jeff McMahon, "Coronavirus May Save More Lives By Preventing Pollution Than By Preventing Infection", *Forbes*, 11 March 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffmcmahon/2020/03/11/coronavirus-lockdown-may-save-more-lives-from-pollution-and-climate-than-from-virus (accessed 27 July 2020).
[5] Howard Yu, "Commentary: How Zoom-working will change companies forever", *CNA*, 20 April 2020, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/zoom-remote-working-change-companies-forever-digital-transform-12651864 (accessed 27 July 2020).
[6] Diane Montagna, "A REMNANT INTERVIEW: Bishop Athanasius Schneider on Church's handling of Coronavirus", *Remnant*, 27 March 2020, https://remnantnewspaper.com/web/index.php/articles/item/4826-exclusive-interview-bishop-athanasius-schneider-on-church-s-handling-of-coronavirus (accessed 27 July 2020).
[7] Fr Mike Schmitz, "How Should Catholics Respond to the Coronavirus Pandemic?", Youtube Video, 10:51, 18 March 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTP5P9PtYwA (accessed 27 July 2020).

ON THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ASIAN THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE TO COVID-19

by JHW Chan

INTRODUCTION

While its name may suggest otherwise, the questions raised by the recent novel coronavirus pandemic (hereafter Covid-19) are not new to Christianity – either in the general or the specific sense. With respect to the former, in over 2,000 years of its existence, the church has encountered more than its fair share of pain, suffering, and tragedy. The large body of literature that has grown over this time is evidence of the awareness and need in the tradition to respond to such issues [1]. With respect to *specific* examples of suffering, neither plagues nor pandemics are new to the church [2]. While the narrative of "theodicy" in the tradition is well developed, there is a question of whether there can be a theological response to the current global pandemic that is uniquely Asian [3]. I address and comment on some aspects of the debate surrounding what "Asian theology" consists in and briefly discuss what kind of options there might be for a contextual Asian response to Covid-19 [4].

METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

It seems to me that there are at the very least two challenges (or perhaps a necessary clarification and a set of challenges) that arise when thinking about the possibility of an Asian theology. Both are related to how one thinks the term "Asian theology" ought to be defined.

In a recent paper, Timoteo D. Gener helpfully writes that Asian theologies are "*theologies* that engage with issues, questions, and concerns arising from Asian contexts while giving priority to the embodiment of those theologies in ecclesial engagements and experiences [emphasis my own] [5]." This definition seems obvious enough – Asian theology is simply theology done in a specific context. However, this can sometimes be overlooked and one must avoid the trap of attempting to speak of a single "Asian theology" as though Asian culture is something homogenous or monolithic [6]. Peter Phan underscores this, "With regard to Asia…it will be clear that its extreme diversities make it a near impossibility to refer to anything – Christianity included – as 'Asian'" [7]. We note then that there is no one "Asian theology" as if the many cultures in Asia and their different contexts can somehow be lumped together under a single title. As we shall see, this clarification is key for unpacking the subsequent discussion on the nature of Asian theology.

A set of challenges stems from the sentiment that a true "Asian" theology is somehow defined in abstraction from the Western tradition from which it arises. A main proponent of this line of thought is Choan-Seng Song whose name is synonymous with Asian theology [8]. He criticises the Asian theologian for her dependence on the Western theological tradition to supply tools of reflection for her own unique contexts [9]. Song sees the need for Asian theology to "undergo a process of change", because the theologies of the West are "inappropriate for Asia" and "genetically

incapable" of knowing what it means to live in the world of Buddhist, Hindu, or Confucian culture [10]. But a problem emerges here which is similar to the difficulty of grouping various Asian theologies under one umbrella term: it is not clear that one can categorise "Western" thought as a singular entity which reflects a well-defined system or unique way of doing theology [11]. To highlight this problem, consider the following from Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen:

> One of the distinctive features of Asian thinking is the reluctance to employ the Western either-or dialectic. Instead, most Asians feel comfortable thinking in terms of yin-yang inclusiveness. This term goes back to Taoism and Confucianism in their Chinese forms. According to such philosophies, change is the interplay of yin and yang. These two terms, crucial to much of Eastern thought (and expressed in different Asian languages and thought forms in varying terminology), mean female-male, weak-strong, light-dark, and so on [12].

As noted above, there is a difficulty in attributing one particular pattern of thought to "Asian thinking" given the vast scope of Asian culture and therefore theologies. But even if we were to grant that the "reluctance to employ the Western either-or dialectic" was a "distinctive feature of Asian thinking" it would still be entirely self-stultifying: the very act of rejecting an either-or dialectic *is an example* of using an either-or dialectic. Thus, if such a mode of thinking is categorised as a feature of "Western" thought, then

regardless of its origin, an Asian theology cannot remove this aspect of its Western heritage from its way of thinking, on the pain of contradiction. It would appear then that there are inherent tools from the Western theological tradition that one must continue using in order to do Asian theology.

Distinctions like Kärkkäinen's serve to illustrate a point made by Simon Chan: "Perhaps it is time to get rid of the habit of describing different patterns of thought in terms of Eastern and Western ways of thinking. In a postmodern, globalised world, such descriptions are neither helpful nor accurate [13]." Moreover, as Stephen B. Bevans has pointed out, "the only kind of theology that exists is 'contextual theology' – theology in other words, that is specific to a particular place, a particular time, a particular culture" [14]. Western theology is not a universally objective and transcendent approach to thinking about God, it is just another example of a contextual theology [15].

The presupposition that Asian theology ought to be niche and independent from the West might be understood as being grounded in the observation that Christianity has (incorrectly) been considered a Western religion and one task of Asian theology is to liberate itself from this misconception [16]. However, in striving for an Asian contextual theology the goal must not be to remove ourselves from the tradition *per impossibile*, but rather, to build on it. As Chan points out, "local cultures do shape the way the faith is received and expressed, but for a local theology to be authentically Christian, it must have substantial continuity with the larger Christian tradition" [17]. And this indeed has been the practice for

the last 2,000 years of Christian thought, as Christianity expands and moves from one context to the next [18]. In expanding into an Asian context, why would we think that this methodology would change?

It is worth pointing out that in his earlier thought, Song approached these issues rather differently, "If an Asian engages himself in theological thinking he does so not by setting himself over against Western Theology, but by trying to learn from it first [19]." This I believe is this is the correct stance we must take in order to properly carry out theology in our own context. We cannot get away with from the larger Christian tradition; an Asian theology must be seen as doing theology within a specific context and in keeping with the tradition of the history of the church.

A RESPONSE TO COVID-19

In light of the foregoing, I suggest two ways that an Asian contextual theology might address the suffering caused by Covid-19 pandemic [20]. Neither are novel moves but they do serve to elucidate a possible methodology.

As alluded to above, problems of pain and suffering have been reflected upon and written about since the inception of Christianity; there is no lack of written theodicies in the contemporary philosophical theological literature [21]. But an Asian contextual response to Covid-19 must start by asking if theodicies of this kind are an appropriate way of response from the various cultures in Asia.

Simon Chan observes:

> "Unlike the Western church in the last two hundred years, the issue for Asian Christians has not been God's presence or absence, or whether God exists or not. In most religious traditions and especially in the world of primal religions, God's existence is never in doubt but always presupposed… The most urgent question for [Asian] Christians is not theism vs atheism or agnosticism but how to make sense of the Christian understanding of God in contexts filled with a plethora of vastly different conceptions of deity [22].

Indeed, historical and contemporary responses to suffering/pain have often been defensive in nature [23]. Often these address variations and relata of the argument found in the writing of David Hume, who echoed Greek thought before him. Hume writes, "Epicurus' old questions are yet unanswered. Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil? [24]" It is tempting to categorise responses to questions like these as being of a generally Western mindset. But perhaps it is more accurate to say that the entailment of the non-existence of God, given the existence of suffering, is an example of thinking not commonly present in Asian cultures. If this is the case, what would a response to suffering and the Covid-19 pandemic look like if such an impulse is removed? If there is the presupposition of the existence God, or some deity in most Asian cultures, what would be an appropriate response [25]?

Here, the Asian theologian might take a page out of the book of the early Church Father Origen. For him, theodicy was not necessarily to do with squaring the idea of the existence of God with natural evil but rather "a deeply personal struggle to make sense of suffering" [26]. He saw the exercise not so much as academic but rather "people navigating through the problem of evil in all their complexity as emotional, spiritual, and intellectual agents" [27]. Thus, in attempting an Asian theological response, one must be aware of the unique nature of the questions raised. Here I have suggested just one example, an alternative to the typical theodicy responses which might be more relevant to an Asian milieu. Further to this line of thinking John Swinton suggests that,

> …in distinction from the Cartesian bent of certain strands of theodicy, the question does not begin from a position of doubting God's love, goodness and faithfulness. Rather, it begins from a position of faith seeking understanding, taking seriously the reality and the pain of suffering, but holding that recognition within the boundaries of the writer to the Hebrews assertion that faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we cannot see [28].

We can see that a suitable (Asian) response to Covid-19 that presupposes the existence of God, may come from a British (Western) theologian. This reinforces the point made by Chan previously that an Eastern-Western categorisation of thought may

be neither helpful nor necessary. Furthermore, neither Origen nor Swinton are Asian or operate within an Asian culture, yet they are still able to shape and speak into growing Asian theologies. Surely this is another reason not to discard the non-Asian tradition in the search of a purely "Asian" contextual theology.

The second approach is what Bo Rin Ro calls "accommodation theology":

> Accommodation is another subtle attempt to contextualise theology in Asia. Just as a hotel or a family accommodates a guest, so theological accommodation considers prevailing customs and religious practices of another culture and *accommodates good ideas from other religions* [emphasis mine].

With respect to accommodation theology, there is a fear that such appropriation of other religions may result in a dilution of faith or at worst syncretism. But such a task is not without precedent in the Christian traditions. We might take one such instance from the Catholic church, which believes that in all religions there are glimpses of truth [29]. Gavin D'Costa, asserts,

> …some truth may be gleaned from non-Christian religions…Is this problematic? It seems to me not. Certain truths may come from unlikely sources. The modern scientific principle of atoms might have first emerged from Greek thought in Democritus, though a

> scientist might not wish to incorporate any of his other beliefs, he may at least agree with him (albeit in a very general way) [30].

Thus, for accommodation theology, the use of an idea that is foreign and yet familiar to Christianity (present in other neighbouring religions, and visible in the culture and context) to illuminate pre-existing thought, may be an available tool of elucidation and inspiration, for the Asian contextual theologian.

An example of accommodation for our present discussion regarding Covid-19 might be an appropriation of Buddhist thought in view of suffering and punishment. One reaction that has been commonly seen in response to Covid-19 is that the pandemic is a result of God's punishment for sin. We might attribute this to the influence of notions of karma that are prevalent in the surrounding cultures of Buddhism and Hinduism [31]. In trying to speak into the problem of suffering Song borrows an example from Buddhism:

> The Buddha rejected a simplistic understanding of karma as the cause of suffering. He stated that suffering could not be fully explained either as a result of one's individual karma or another's karma inflicted upon the sufferer. Suffering, the Buddha went on, is rooted in ignorance and is a profound matter not easily understood. Song used the Buddhist text in support of the cited biblical examples to argue that a God of retribution is an abhorrent concept, alien to both true Christian faith and Buddhist belief [32].

Unlike Song, however, we can appropriate helpful Buddhist insight without feeling the need to depart from the Western tradition, instead we can continue to learn and to draw from it.

CONCLUSION

In his seminal paper, "Towards an Asian theology" Saphir Athyal writes that "the task theology of any people is to articulate their understanding of the eternal truth in terms of their given locale and context [33]." In this brief paper I have tried to outline some of the challenges faced in attempting to formulate an Asian theology. An Asian theologian is simply one who writes from a unique cultural and theological context whilst remaining deeply indebted to the church tradition that has emerged from scripture and gone before them. I have used the example of responding to one aspect of Covid-19 as a way of highlighting the need to correctly identify the relevant cultural issues and the possibility of "accommodation" from other religions.

We remember also that human suffering is universal, and this suffering itself already sets the context for our theological endeavours. As in the case of Covid-19, this transcends geographical specificities. Rather than distinguishing and attempting to distance East from West, the current Covid-19 situation presents an opportunity for both East and West to contribute to the larger conversation rather than to assert one's independence and distinctiveness from another [34]. Moreover, the possibility of Asian theologies lies in the simple task of carrying out theology in a specific context, and in agreement with Chan, such an

enterprise cannot be done in isolation or independence from the tradition, whether Western or otherwise [35].

Notes:

[1] For an overview of theodicy in the Bible, in particular the Hebrew scriptures, see Antii Laato and Johannes C. de Moor, eds., *Theodicy in the World of the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 2003). For an overview of patristic responses to these issues, see Nonna Verna Harrison and David G., Hunter, *Suffering and Evil in Early Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016). For a helpful summary of some medieval responses, see Eleonore Stump, "The Problem of Evil", in *The Cambridge Companion to the History of Medieval Philosophy*, A.S. Mcgrade, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). See https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil/ for a comprehensive bibliography of contemporary responses (accessed 13 Sept. 2020).

[2] The Plague of Galen in AD 165-180, the Plague of Justinian (AD 541-542), the Black Death in the 14th century (1346-1353) to name a few. More recently we can point to various cholera pandemics in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The HIV/AIDS pandemic at its peak in 2005-2012 has had a death toll of around 32 million, see www.mphonline.org/worst-pandemics-in-history (accessed 13 September 2020).

[3] The term theodicy was coined by Leibniz as recent as the 17th century, but the problem of evil, suffering, and its implications can be found in the pages of the Bible, the *locus classicus* of course being the book of Job. Eleonore Stump's working definition of theodicy is the question, "can one hold,

consistently with the common view of suffering in the world, that there is an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God?" Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). p.3. In *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), Alvin Plantinga refines of the use of the word: he distinguishes between "defences" and "theodicies". The former are arguments in response to the assertion that the coexistence of evil and God is impossible. The latter aims to show that given the existence of God, the existence of evil is not unlikely/implausible phenomena.

[4] Due to considerations of space, I outline some possible general responses but am unable to flesh out the content of these here.

[5] Timoteo D. Gener, "Doing Contextual Systematic Theology in Asia: Challenges and Prospects", *Journal of Asian Evangelical Theology*, Vol. 22 Nos. 1-2 (March-September 2018): pp.49-68.

[6] "In this sense, it is simplistic to talk of a single Asian theology. Dalit theology of India, Minjung theology of Korea, the many forms of indigenous and feminist theologies spanning Asia, make it difficult to speak of one Asian theology." Vimal Tirimanna, "Asian Theology" in Lewis Ayres and Medi Ann Volpe, eds., *The Oxford handbook of Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[7] Peter C. Phan, *Asian Christianities: History, Theology Practice* (New York: Orbis Books, 2018).

[8] "One needs only to look at some recent works by Western scholars on Asian theology to see that for them Asian theology means…. the theologies of C. S. Song", Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2014), p.23.

[9] Choan-Seng Song, "A Theological Community with a Cutting Edge," in ATESEA Occasional Papers, No. 7: Challenges and Opportunities in Theological Education in Asia, Yeow Choo Lak, ed. (Singapore: ATESEA, 1988), p.90.
[10] Kenneth Fleming, "Asian Christian Theologians in Dialogue with Buddhism: A Study of the Writings of Kosuke Koyama, Choan-Seng Song and Aloysius Pieris" (PhD dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2000), p.109.
[11] In addition to this, there are aspects of the certain Asian theologies that have inherited traditions which are not Western in their origin. Consider, as one example, the Marthoma churches across Asia.
[12] Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christology a Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), p.218.
[13] Chan, *Grassroots theology*, p.9. Chan goes on to say, "That there are basic differences arising from different cultural experiences cannot be denied, but whether these distinctions should be demarcated as Eastern and Western is another matter. What is sometimes called the Western way of thinking should more accurately be called Cartesian and Enlightenment thought, which does not exclusively define Western epistemology and philosophy."
[14] Stephen B. Bevans, *Essays in Contextual Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), p.1.
[15] My thanks to James Harding for bringing this up to me in conversation.
[16] "It is a bitter irony that while Christianity was born in Asia, it returned to its birthplace as a Western religion imported to Asia by Portuguese and Spanish colonialists in the 16th century, and

later by other European countries such as Britain, France, Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands, and last by the United States." Peter Phan, "Introduction: Asian Christianity/Christianities", in Peter Phan, *Christianities in Asia*, p.2.

[17] Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, p.11.

[18] "From Pentecost to the twentieth century, Christian history may be divided into six phases. Each phase represents its embodiment in a major culture area which has meant that in that phase it has taken an impress from that culture. In each phase the expression of the Christian faith has developed features which could only have originated in that culture whose impress it has taken within that phase." Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), p.16.

[19] Choan-Seng Song, "The Obedience of Theology in Asia," *South East Asian Journal of Theology* 2, no. 2 (1960): p.11.

[20] While there are of course theological concerns outside of suffering with respect to Covid-19, for example, social ethics, I limit the scope of inquiry due to restrictions of space. Though, this one area sufficiently serves as an example to highlight common ground and the alleged differences between Eastern and Western approaches to specific topics in theology for our discussion.

[21] See note 1.

[22] Here we are cautious to not fall into the trap outlined in the previous section – Asian theology does not designate a single theology but rather refers to the various theologies being practiced in different Asian contexts. Thus, we might qualify Chan's statement as "what seems to be the issue for *most* Asian Christians…"

[23] See David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2011), John Lennox *Where is God in a Coronavirus world* (Surrey, The Good Book Company, 2020) and Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, among others for examples of this.

[24] Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, part 10 (1779), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4583/4583-h/4583-h.htm (accessed 13th September 2020).

[25] With respect to Chan's comments about Western thought being seen more accurately as "Cartesian or Enlightenment" Karyn Kilby has written about the enterprise of theodicy as a "pattern of enquiry as found in philosophy of religion texts and other such places is a distinctive product of the Enlightenment rather than a natural continuation of any kind of theological tradition". See Karyn Kilby, *God and the Limits of Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), p.68. Given that no Asian country underwent an Enlightenment of its own, it is perhaps not surprising that the presupposition of the supernatural/deity is present. Though again, I am cautious to not tar all Asian theologies with the same brush. To properly argue that this presupposition applies to most Asian contexts, the theologian must consult the sociologist of religion.

[26] Mark S.M. Scott, *Journey back to God: Origen on the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.20.

[27] Scott, *Journey back to God*, p.20.

[28] John Swinton, "Living Faithfully in the Presence of Suffering" in Francesca Aran Murphy and Philip G. Ziegler, eds. *The Providence of God: Deus Habet Consilium* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), p.278.

[29] See §2 *in Nostra Aetate*, http://w2.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html (accessed 13th September 2020). My thanks to Simon Kang for this reference.
[30] Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Orbis books: New York, 2000), p.106.
[31] There are of course also reasons from within the Christian tradition for thinking this might be the case. For example, I. Howard Marshall writes, "By [New Testament] times there was a clear Jewish understanding [that the Old Testament] taught that sin could lead to judgement in this world, such as national exile or and disaster, natural disasters and individual illness and suffering." see "The New Testament Does Not Teach Universal Salvation" in Robin Parry and Christopher H. Partridge, eds., *Universal Salvation: The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p.56.
[32] Fleming, "Asian Christian Theologians in Dialogue with Buddhism". See Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990) pp.49-50. The Buddhist text, from the Samyutta-nikaya II can be found in Edward Conze, ed., *Buddhist Texts through the Ages* (Oxford: Bruno Cassier, 1954), pp.68-69.
[33] Saphir Athyal, "Towards an Asian Theology" in Douglas J. Elwood, *What Asian Christians are Thinking: A Theological Source Book* (Manilla: New Day Publishers, 1976), p.68.
[34] Thanks to Sherman Kuek for bringing this point to my attention.
[35] My thanks and gratitude to James Harding, Lin Khee Vun, Simon Kang, and Charlotte Ng for helpful comments and

suggestions on this paper. Special thanks to Sherman Kuek for asking me to contribute this piece and for lively discussions on the subject of theology, both Asian and otherwise. Any errors remaining are solely my own.

RISING FROM THE ASHES: IS THERE STILL HOPE WHEN THE WORLD FAILS YOU?

by Sherman Kuek, OFS

THE FAILURE OF WORLD SYSTEMS

As we ponder on the issue of hope, the infection of the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) in China since December 2019 and its subsequent spread outside of China since January 2020 has now affected nearly every country on the face of this earth.

From the outset of the epidemic (that is, when it was still localised), world governments in whom citizens invested their trust and often-misplaced hopes were entertaining the delusion that they could still, in the face of the fast-spreading viral infection, preserve the capitalistic eutopia of their societies. Those who have been following the news on media are of course well-versed with how China is widely being accused of having suppressed information pertaining to how far the epidemic was taking ground within the city of Wuhan itself, and how the whistleblower ophthalmologist Dr Li Wenliang was admonished sternly by authorities for allegedly having mongered rumours [1]. Certainly, this issue has become a complicated controversy as many other relevant factors are considered, but that is a matter for a separate discussion.

Meanwhile, other governments (especially those in the West) failed to take the catastrophe seriously. Many seemed to selfishly have taken a back seat in being glad that the epidemic at that time was in some far-off oriental land and not in their own backyards.

In fact, news reports show how President Donald Trump's administration, in the ongoing battle between the Republicans and the Democrats in the United States of America, was preoccupied with the impeachment trial in January 2020 to the extent that he dismissed warnings from his own Health Secretary over the looming Covid-19 situation in America as "alarmist" [2]. There was perhaps a hint of triumphalism as well in America as they watched China burn and witnessed the value of the American dollar rising (which tends to happen whenever volatile circumstances emerge around the world) [3]. After all, the fact that China was shutting down would certainly weaken America's worthy opponent in the ongoing trade war between the two nations. It might even compel more American manufacturers to bring their operations back to their own country, and this would certainly "Make America Great Again" (the campaign slogan that won Trump his 2016 Presidential election). And since they did not anticipate that this "fortunately" faraway event would have any drastic economic consequences on America, it was more convenient to ignore the warnings of their own healthcare experts by concluding that the situation was "like a miracle; it will disappear" [4]. Never did the Trump Administration anticipate that the novel coronavirus would be infecting the American people in the hundreds of thousands, triggering a panic over the entire nation. And now that the unexpected has materialised, it has been deemed appropriate that the narrative be reconstructed through the demonisation of the country from whence the virus came, thus accusatorily naming this pandemic the "Chinese virus" against the advice of the World Health

Organisation about building blame into a name and perpetuating racial discrimination [5].

Meanwhile, the European continent too has become the epicentre of the pandemic, and its political leaders are doing rather well at demonstrating just how the solidarity that the European nations have pledged to one another in their European Union is little more than a selfish relationship of convenience. With an ongoing focus on economic cooperation and mutual gain, none of the European governments took seriously the situation of the coronavirus pandemic. It was economically more expedient to ignore the countless warnings that simplistic containment efforts would prove inefficacious. But now that the continent has been hit by this crisis, member countries are found to have closed borders and kept medical resources from one another. Italy and Spain, being the worst hit countries, seem to be left out in the cold as most of the other countries continue squabbling in a self-preserving spirit. Europe is in danger of not being able to weather this situation out economically, not because there are insufficient resources, but because there is a refusal of the richer north to offer support to the poorer south. Again, like America, this fair-weathered union finds it easier to point the blame finger at a common enemy: China [6].

Of course, lest a picture of a noble Chinese Communist Party be painted by my unintended oversight, we cannot pretend that the Chinese government's seemingly benevolent action of disseminating medical supplies all around the world is anything altruistic. The news portals are replete with coverage on what is now dubbed as China's "mask diplomacy" being a manipulation of the

current narrative to assert global dominance over the weakened West. Without prejudice towards the people of China, we must conclude that there is in fact no innocence in the seeming kindness that the Chinese government is portraying to the world. This is the same government that did attempt to suppress information from the rest of the world at the onset of the epidemic, most likely for economic reasons as well.

It would seem that the behaviour of most, if not all, world governments is driven primarily by economic concerns. In this case, this economic motivation has brought much detriment to the peoples of the world and the citizens of the nations who trusted in our governments to discharge their utmost administrative obligations with our wellbeing in mind.

The governments of the world have failed their peoples. At the point of this writing, many of them have yet to get their act together, which explains why it has become doubly hard to combat the common enemy that is the novel coronavirus. Masking their hypocrisy, driven by selfishness and systemic sin, is the blame game. Such governmental failures should neither shock nor scandalise us, for the downfall of bureaucracies in various forms is probably as old as human civilisation.

There are two crucial points to note from what has been delineated above. Firstly, we cannot look to governments and human institutions to ensure the survival of our civilisations. To be sure, secular governments are important in order to preserve a certain kind of order in human societies. Saint Augustine of Hippo,

in his explanation on the two realms of government in *The City of God* (published in 426 CE), suggests that God has dichotomised the created world into two dimensions which are distinct from each other, although they are not entirely separate. On the one side is the "city of God" that consists of all things supernatural and includes the Christian community. The city of God is governed by divine law and is more concerned with the direction of creation to eternal existence. On the other side is the "earthly city" that consists of all things political such as the state government, the economy, social stratification, and the military. Whilst earthly governments are crucial for the purpose of establishing order in our temporal world, we must remember that it is the government of God that is most concerned for the moral order and the peace of humanity on earth, both being aspects constantly abandoned by civil governments when their characters are being tested throughout challenging times.

As Christians, if we have often forgotten that the moral authority of the city of God prescribes limits to the authority of the earthly city, we must now restore the authority of God's kingdom over our lives and choices that we make about how we shall live. For far too long, we have allowed ourselves to be deceived by the persuasions of the civil governments and their political and economic mechanisms. We must return to our ultimate obedience to the city of God, for that is the only government that will ensure the safety of humanity and the flourishing of the human spirit. We should cooperate with our governments only to the extent that they give rise to the dignity of human life and the common good of civil societies. The current failures that we witness of human

governments remind us that we have perhaps misplaced an exaggerated magnitude of trust in human institutions for far too long. Even the perfect vision of democracy has failed to keep the tyranny of human sin at bay. For a change, it is time to pay keener attention to how the kingdom of God says we should live through the current pandemic and after it.

Secondly, the pandemic has now spiraled into a global economic crisis. And many people, including Christians, are not protected from the effects of this economic situation because we have bought into the doctrine of modern capitalism lock, stock, and barrel. By modern capitalism, I mean more than merely undertaking some kind of economic activity in order to derive profits to assist us in our living. Modern capitalism is an all-encompassing system that controls the way societies function, not just financially, but also socially, politically, morally, psychologically, emotionally, and even religiously. Beyond having as its purpose the creation of wealth for survival, it propagates the greed of creating wealth for excessive abundance.

Modern capitalistic governments themselves today are perpetuating this system of creating insatiable appetites in people, and then making them work excessively to earn the means to spend for the fulfilment of these infinite desires. It is a vicious cycle that has been in motion for generation after generation of humanity. This is precisely the mechanism that is breaking down at this time of the pandemic, for suppliers are no longer able to function in regular fashion because of a breakdown in logistics, supply of raw materials, and supply of manpower. Buyers themselves too are

affected because their work and therefore their incomes are impeded by the capitalists' inability to employ effectively, thereby causing a severance of gainful employment. Many are suffering because they have no money to pay for all the debts they have incurred over the years, and at a more basic level, they have no money to support their daily survival and that of their families. Christians too are not spared, for many of us have become complicit in this capitalistic system and its doctrine of continuous acquisition.

If the recent coronavirus pandemic has brought about one good, it is that it has actualised the failure of world governments to act morally in the interest of humanity and the breakdown of the economic system in which we have placed our trust for so many decades. Perhaps many are awakened to a new world today, a world upon which we have placed too much hope and invested too much of our future at the expense of our life in the world to come.

While this writing is being penned, humanity is nowhere close to the conclusion of the pandemic. The pattern of this pandemic in many of our societies has not even peaked yet, and the movement control orders, restrictions, and lockdowns taking place are causing a deep and scarring financial, emotional, and mental crisis to the masses. The various governments are struggling to look like they are in perfect control of circumstances when they know they are not. For once, the reality of the situation confronting humanity is so stark that it cannot be effectively masked by political or economic manipulators.

WHY IS THERE STILL HOPE?

I had a conversation with an old friend of mine, Dr James Koh, who is a Professor at the International Medical University (Malaysia) and whose medical sub-specialisation deals with the very pertinent field of Infectious Diseases. The sobering conversation with James began with his following statement:

> I wonder if people are aware that COVID-19 is here to stay and we will have to live with it even after the lifting of the MCO (Movement Control Order), at least until an effective cure or vaccine is available.

In his practical estimation, life will certainly not revert to the way it was prior to the current pandemic. And should we all decide to stop observing proper social distancing etiquettes and begin congregating in large assemblies again, "Eventually most if not all of us will be infected. It's not a question of 'if', it's 'when'. And of these, three to four percent will perish."

My immediate reaction upon listening to his professional assessment of the situation was, "What hope have we?" It was rather an irony that this question presented itself because this conversation took place during Holy Week when all Christians were anticipating the lengthy celebration of the Easter Season. At Easter, we celebrate our hope in Christ and His defeat of evil and death by His mighty resurrection. And yet, each day throughout this season, the lives of thousands of human beings were being taken by the coronavirus infections.

Just within the past two weeks alone, at the point of this writing, I had to witness from afar several friends whose family members were afflicted by death albeit not resulting from the coronavirus. The grieving families had to bury their dead without the usual large gathering of friends and community members who would otherwise have made themselves constantly present as a source of consolation for the mourning. In some way, I felt their pain and sorrow and wished that if death had to befall their family members, surely there could be "better" times for it. Hence, what hope did we have to speak of as we observed the coming Easter season? What cause did we have to rejoice?

I believe that the call of Easter is to reposition our sense of hope in a source that is authentic, that promises an immortality that we can know for sure will eventually become reality. For far too long, our sense of mortality has been acquired as a delusion that results from an abundance of wealth and health and all that capitalistic governments promise in order to keep the economic wheel turning. We felt invincible because of the organisational positions we held, the wealth we thought we had, and the excellent annual medical reports from our physicians. There was in fact little need for God, for we felt very much as if we were gods ourselves. That is in fact the point of modern capitalism: to render the delusion of invincibility into a commodity that can be traded. And the coronavirus pandemic has done well to remind us that we are not as invincible as we thought we were, that nations are not as indestructible as they would like people to believe they are. We have been gods only in our feebly deceived minds.

The point of this writing is not to say that our hope is in vain, but that our hope must not be placed in vain things. There is hope to be had, and this hope must be found in an authentic source. And if this hope is to be real, then it cannot be a hope in a world that has broken down. We need a source that assures us of a real hope, that is, a hope that all the catastrophes of life we currently experience will not spiral into an ultimate tragedy for humanity.

In November 2007, the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, promulgated his second encyclical *Spe Salvi* ("Saved by Hope"). My reflections in this writing shall dwell much on his encyclical for it deals with our current concern in a very direct manner.

Benedict XVI begins his encyclical by acknowledging that if hope is to be real, then it has to come with a certainty for those who hold this hope. For Christians, he says, the certainty of hope comes from "the fact that they have a future" (#2). He qualifies this by explaining that this hope does not come from knowing with exact precision all the details of what the future holds. Rather, it comes from a knowing that their lives will not be for nothing, since they have encountered the light of Christ and therefore are enlightened by the meaning of their existence. This hope brings a transformation of life and a commitment defined and guided by the very meaning of one's existence. The basis of this entire logic of Christian hope is found in knowing God. When one knows God in a personal way, this knowing sheds light on every other matter pertaining to one's own existence and to events taking place within human history.

> It is not the elemental spirits of the universe, the laws of matter, which ultimately govern the world and mankind, but a personal God governs the stars, that is, the universe; it is not the laws of matter and of evolution that have the final say, but reason, will, love – a Person. And if we know this Person and he knows us, then truly the inexorable power of material elements no longer has the last word; we are not slaves of the universe and of its laws, we are free… Life is not a simple product of laws and the randomness of matter, but within everything and at the same time above everything, there is a personal will, there is a Spirit who in Jesus has revealed himself as Love. (*Spe Salvi*, 5)

One of the most prominent among philosophers of the modern age who were hostile to the idea of hope in a personal God was Karl Marx. For Marx, the 19th-century German philosopher whom many people understand to be the father of socialism, economics was the basis of how human life was regulated and how human history unfolded. Economic considerations were what gave birth to various social classes and the distinctions between them, as well as division of labour, together with all sorts of societal mechanisms that functioned to preserve this *status quo*. Religion, for him, was yet another tool employed by oppressors in order to give a false hope to the suffering and deprived, to lull them into a state of resignation that their pitiful economic lot in life would somehow culminate in an eternity of hope and bliss. This led to his statement, "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart

of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people;" or often simply paraphrased as "religion is the opium of the masses" (*die religion ist das opium des volkesis*) [7]. For Marx, humanity created religion, not *vice versa*. Religion is therefore nothing but a creature of capitalism that oppresses the poor to serve the ideals of the rich; there is actually no God as the religious communities propose. Religion is purely a social construct to ensure the continuous suppression of the poor masses and to help them cope with the horrors of modern economic life.

There is much to be said about Karl Marx, for the depth of his systematic thought cannot be reduced into a single paragraph. However, for the purpose of brevity, we must move on with our discussion on where Marx went wrong in his assessment of religion, in his case, Christianity (Marx was born into a Jewish family but they converted into Christianity in order that his father might continue in his career as a legal practitioner under the Prussian anti-Jewish laws).

There is indeed credit in rather a few points that Marx advances against modern capitalism. Many Christian authors have interacted with his writings precisely because they have found themselves grappling with the same questions as Marx's own with regards to modern capitalism. But his thinking radically diverges from the Christian schema at the point where a solution is to be identified. He calls for the abolishment of religion as one of the important solutions to end the oppression of the lower classes of people. He desires an egalitarian society wherein everyone is equal,

and religion, together with its belief in a transcendent God, stands in the way of his proposed system.

Elsewhere, Benedict XVI explains that Marx's vision failed because of the simplistic assumption that once the socio-economic systems are set right, humanity would achieve its desired state of equality:

> He forgot that man always remains man. He forgot man and he forgot man's freedom. He forgot that freedom always remains also freedom for evil. He thought that once the economy had been put right, everything would automatically be put right. His real error is materialism: man, in fact, is not merely the product of economic conditions, and it is not possible to redeem him purely from the outside by creating a favourable economic environment [8].

In other words, the problem with the alienation experienced by mankind is more than an external environment gone wrong. Marx forgot about humanity's own intrinsic propensity towards evil such that even an ideal system would be flawed by man's own choices and actions. This is why the communism(s) that we witness alive in specific localities around the world today are debris of an expired ideology, heavily redefined and drastically distorted at best. In fact, these modern deviated forms of the socialist system proposed by Marx are not in the least attempting to participate in Marx's social transformation project.

Our ultimate hope is not in transforming worldly governments or replacing the monetary system that regulates human societies today. If the hope we have is only thus deep, then the state of our societies today in the face of the current pandemic is pitiable and all hope for a future is abolished in the light of human helplessness. Evidently, a hope that is placed in political and economic mechanisms as means for the perfection of the world is a misplaced one at best.

Returning to the contents of *Spe Salvi*, Benedict XVI sets out to help the children of the Church to understand that our hope is in the Kingdom of God, that is, a timeless reality that can be experienced in the present life. The key to experiencing this timeless Kingdom is faith, and the fruit of this faith is hope.

And how can we know that our faith in God and his Kingdom is not in vain? The Holy Father explains that our faith in God enables us to be drawn into an experience of His Kingdom in the here-and-now, and this experience is what confirms that our faith is true and thus is worthy of our Christian hope. Further to that, this experience is not just a private or individualistic one, for if that were so, then one could be merely suffering from hallucination. On the contrary, the Christian faith, and the hope that it bears, is in fact a very social one. It is a faith that is shared by countless individuals within a community that experiences this hope together and embodies it in a visible way. The Christian community enjoys this hope together and actualises it concretely by sharing in a heavenly communion of love. When faith is embraced beyond one's self and its hope is experienced by an entire community that is drawn into the heavenly

life, this hope cannot be a mere collective hallucination. Hence, a requisite for receiving this faith and its resulting hope is, paradoxically, self-abandonment and self-denial, opening the self to others to enter into our lives and our space in order that we too may be drawn into the common faith.

For the Holy Father, this communal aspect of the Christian faith is utterly crucial especially given that the religious senses of the modern people have gone in two polar directions today. There are those who have become secular to the extent that their faith is placed in systems, in politics, in economics, and in calculable and replicable mechanisms. Their hope thrives on the promise of predictability, extrapolation, monitoring and control. And then, there are also those who have swung to the other extreme of a hyper-spirituality that defines spiritual experiences in a totally exclusive and individualistic framework. In this latter case, there is no way to verify that which the adherents think to be revelations from divine sources. The Christian faith and its accompanying hope sit in favour of neither one of these two alternatives. It is a faith that is deeply experiential, and yet its experience of the hope of heaven is shared intimately at a communal scale.

Evidently, the Marxist philosophy that has contributed to the material atheism today has failed. Many, even in the religious world, do not identify themselves as material atheists for they do profess belief in God. But at the same time, the life that is lived is one of practical atheism, paying primary attention to the acquisition of wealth and health and all temporal concerns whilst paying nothing more than a regular weekly lip service to all matters "unseen". If

hope is to be recovered when all these idols of our age have failed us, we must return to a real faith in God and in the communion that partakes in His life, that is, His Holy Church; only then can our hope be real.

It is worth noting that the Holy Father, at the end of his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, devotes a portion of it to the necessity of the human hope itself being purified. While we revel in the idea of hope, the sinful state of humanity in the present order is such that even our ultimate desires can be severely disordered at worst or mildly distorted at best, and our final entry into eternity may need to be punctuated by a process of purification in order to align our hopes with the real hope that God offers to all of creation. This is the process that the Holy Catholic Church refers to as purgatory (*purgatio* in Latin, which simply means "purification").

A SUMMARY

The current times call upon Christians to embrace a new way of life with accordance to the ancient Christian mind, a way that is relevant to the need of contemporary society for a hope that is authentic and real.

I remember a simple sentence preached by a Christian lady when I was a very young boy who understood very little about life and faith. She said much to me week after week, but this is the only sentence I remember from her and which I carry with me to this day, and it rings true now at a time when hope in everything else seems to have failed: THE CHRISTIAN HOPE IS NOT HOPELESS.

Notes:

[1] Rowan Scarborough, "China deliberately hid coronavirus, admonished whistleblowers", *The Washington Times,* 20 March 2020, https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/mar/20/china-hid-coronavirus-admonished-whistleblowers/ (accessed 21 September 2020).

[2] Tom Porter, "Trump reportedly dismissed January coronavirus warnings from Health Secretary Alex Azar as 'alarmist'", *Business Insider,* 5 April 2020, https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-dismissed-azar-coronavirus-warnings-as-alarmist-wapo-2020-4 (accessed 21 September 2020).

[3] Tim Ahmann, "Coronavirus to have little impact on US economy – Trump adviser", *The Star,* 31 January 2020, https://www.thestar.com.my/news/world/2020/01/31/coronavirus-to-have-little-impact-on-us-economy---trump-adviser (accessed 21 September 2020). Of course, there is also a view that America in fact does not favour the value of its dollar rising too much. It would seem that Trump has been sending out mixed signals on these sentiments.

[4] Ed Pilkington, "How science finally caught up with Trump's playbook – with millions of lives at stake", *The Guardian,* 4 April 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/04/trump-coronavirus-science-analysis (accessed 21 September 2020).

[5] Dan Mangan, "Trump blames China for coronavirus pandemic: 'The world is paying a very big price for what they did'", *CNBC,* 19 March 2020,

https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/19/coronavirus-outbreak-trump-blames-china-for-virus-again.html (accessed 21 September 2020).
[6] Michael Ivanovich, "Europe should stand up and compete, not blame China", *CNBC*, 21 January 2020, https://www.cnbc.com/2019/01/21/europe-should-stand-up-and-compete-not-blame-china---commentary.html (accessed 21 September 2020).
[7] Karl Marx, *Introduction to "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right", Collected Works*, volume 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1976).
[8] Joseph Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe? The Church in the Modern World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), p.82.

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CHRISTE is a non-profit academic institution and not an ecclesiastical one, although it is open to collaborate with and be of service to ecclesiastical institutions. It is chartered as a Research Institute under the prerogative of the United Nations Treaty Series 49006/49007. This means that CHRISTE comes under the legal governance of international law, which is consistent with the global character of the Institute.

By virtue of its charter, CHRISTE is also an affiliated Research Institute of the School of Theology and Interfaith Studies belonging to *Pôle Universitaire Euclide* (a specialised intergovernmental

institution existing to provide postgraduate education for diplomats and senior civil servants of participating countries as well as employees of the United Nations). CHRISTE is therefore authorised to facilitate the study of Christian Theology (either Catholic, Orthodox, or Comparative Theologies) and Interfaith Studies for prospective students at large who wish to pursue masters or doctoral degrees by distance learning. Degrees are conferred by *Pôle Universitaire Euclide* (listed in the UNESCO/IAU World Higher Education Database with identity IAU-024734).

POSTGRADUATE STUDIES

Part of CHRISTE's mission is to promote the study of Christian Theology and Interfaith Dialogue among the Christian populace in order to equip them to think theologically on pertinent matters impacting faith, life, and society.

CHRISTE awards the Certificate and Diploma in Theological Engagement (either Catholic Studies or Comparative Theologies) by distance learning. The certificates and diplomas

are conferred by CHRISTE and validated by *Pôle Universitaire Euclide*. Candidates are able to study at their own pace.

CHRISTE is also authorised to facilitate the study of Christian Theology (either Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Comparative Theologies) and Interfaith Dialogue for prospective students of the general public who wish to pursue masters or doctoral degrees by distance learning. All postgraduate degrees are conferred by EUCLID itself, which is listed in the UNESCO/IAU World Higher Education Database with identity IAU-024734. Similarly, candidates are able to study at their own pace.

Prospective students who meet the academic requirements may enrol into any of the following programmes:

AWARDED BY CHRISTE (VALIDATED BY EUCLID)

1. Certificate in Theological Engagement (CertTE) in Roman Catholic Studies
2. Certificate in Theological Engagement (CertTE) in Comparative Christian Theologies
3. Diploma in Theological Engagement (DipTE) in Roman Catholic Studies
4. Diploma in Theological Engagement (DipTE) in Comparative Christian Theologies

AWARDED BY EUCLID

5. Master of Arts (MA) / Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Roman Catholic Theology
6. Master of Arts (MA) / Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Orthodox Theology
7. Master of Arts (MA) / Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Comparative Christian Theology
8. Master of Science (MSc) / Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Interreligious Dialogue and Diplomacy

For further enquiry, do contact us: mail@christeonline.org

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