

*The Body of Christ in the Pandemic:  
Theological Reflections from Asian Perspectives<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Due to its length, this paper is divided into two FABC Papers: No. 168 contains Part 1 and Part 2 A. In Families; No. 169 contains Part 2 B. In Local Churches, C. In Creation until Part 3: Walking Forward Together.

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## **Part 1 CONTEXTUALIZING OUR REFLECTION**

### **A. Framework: Covid-19, the body and the Body of Christ**

The global pandemic has challenged our perspectives, beliefs and lifeways. As members of the Catholic Church in Asia, we the theologians from the Office for Theological Concerns of the FABC would like to reflect on what this unprecedented experience has meant for us and how it is reshaping our ways of believing and living our mission.

This paper wants to take the body as a theological locus, a site for God's revelation. People's bodies, as well as emotions and social health, have been severely affected by the Corona virus. In the meantime, our governments have decided how our bodies should behave as they enacted laws and policies on public safety and daily living- from education to getting food and other supplies to entertainment and social life. With 260 million cases, 6 million deaths, mental health issues on the rise and continuing physical distancing as well as limited body movements, the Covid pandemic has definitely taken its toll on our cultural and spiritual lives and challenging our long-held values.

Although carrying a negative outlook on the body in its early history - influenced by Greek dualism that separates body and spirit - Christianity has always been a faith based on the body. It is a faith grounded on Incarnation - God has taken on a body, became flesh in Jesus who lived with us. Called the Body of Christ and centered on a ritual celebration - the Eucharist - the Catholic Church reenacts Jesus Christ's offering of his own body and blood for the salvation of peoples, symbolized by a communion host partaken by everyone. The Church too has carried a badge through the years of caring for bodies through charitable work - hospitals, food stations, orphanages, refuge for women and children in difficult situations - and acts of solidarity - caring for the poorest and the earth, fighting for justice and peace. This mission is the continuing embodiment of our faith, becoming Jesus' body in our world.

Even in the years before the pandemic, the body has been placed on stage as different body issues became very prominent – beauty (diet, exercise, body contouring, plastic and cosmetic surgery); health (malnutrition, different sicknesses, depression, suicide and other mental health issues, biotechnology or genetic engineering); gender (LGBTQ+ communities and their rights, labor and social discrimination, educational and other opportunities); social (surrogacy, same sex marriages, changing concept of family, pornography); political (refugees, child prostitution, human trafficking, etc., gender and social issues too have political implications); and religious (sexual abuse, emotional and spiritual abuse, clericalism, dominance of male bodies in leadership, etc.).

With the pandemic, the body has been put on center-stage. This is a good time to retrieve one of, if not the, oldest images of church – the Body of Christ – and see how the pandemic experiences are challenging and renewing this image and how it will reshape our Church teachings, spirituality and mission. The first part will look at pandemic experiences from an Asia-wide perspective. The main part of this paper theologizes on the Body of Christ lived in the families, in the local churches and in ecology. Every section will reflect on how the Body of Christ is suffering, deeply connected to the cross and the saving story of Jesus, the Christ. Because Christian life follows his paschal mystery, this paper would like to reflect on what cultural and theological energies will help the whole world heal through our families, our local churches and faith communities and our daily relationship with nature. It ends with pastoral pathways, some suggestions that will sustain new insights and build up a new culture.

We chose to reflect on the family, the church and ecology as these were what affected people the most. As we have seen in the pandemic, people managed their work and everyday lives, even faith life, around the homes. As the church centers – where liturgy, formation, mission activities happen – physically closed for some time and even now have limited their activities, new

liturgies and ministries arise as people turn to their faith in the midst of the daily fight for survival. Even in the midst of difficulties, local governments, civic groups and ordinary people also joined together in self-help projects and solidarity work. Our concept of home has extended to neighbors and strangers as we understand each other's suffering. More than anything, we realize even more that we have a common home, the planet, and how this pandemic is so connected to the way we have treated creation. As air pollution worsened the spread of this virus and food production as well as other daily life needs became so limited when everything locked down, we were forced to confront the way we have treated creation.

The pandemic time can be considered a liminal space, an in-between time, a threshold. Maybe people still dream of going back to the time before this pandemic and to the time after, but all are being asked to accept and welcome the 'new normal'. This liminal space and time, which has not ended, has really challenged us and forced us to evaluate our lives, look at what is really important and adapt or transform. In a theological sense, the liminal space is a space for renewal and transformation, like the biblical stories of in-between time: the exodus of the Israelites, stories of the prophets (e.g., Elijah during the drought), Jesus and disciples on seas and mountain trips, Mary's visit to Elizabeth, the genesis of the early Christian communities, etc.

Anthropologist Victor Turner theorizes on the connection between liminality and *communitas*: the liminal experiences produce new kinds of communities he calls existential or spontaneous. When individuals enter into *communitas* they become "liminal entities," that "have no status... rank or role, position in a kinship system."<sup>2</sup> He alludes this experience of *communitas* to people who "fall into the interstices of social structure, are on its margins, or occupy its lower rungs."<sup>3</sup> The relationship between members of *communitas*, as much as it gives

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 95.

<sup>3</sup> Turner, *Ritual Process*, 125.

life to them, also revitalizes the structure. It is important for both *communitas* and structure to continue to be in dialogue with each other towards renewal.<sup>4</sup> We can ask ourselves what kind of social and faith communities have we become because of our pandemic experience?

Turner's work was influenced by performance theorist Richard Schechner's works on drama and ritual which helped him develop a theory of performance that understands performance as an "object of study," and also as an "active intellectual-artistic practice."<sup>5</sup> Whether on stage or in real life situations and rituals, people perform symbolic actions that can be interpreted and reinterpreted. Schechner's theory of "restored behavior," proposes to "treat ordinary life behavior as if they were film strips that one can take, retake, and edit."<sup>6</sup> He says that if people are given the chance to replay a given behavior, they have the possibility to recreate their situation. It has been a prolonged global crisis and people's survival strategies have been played, refined, or renewed. How are people recreating this difficult situation? By focusing on bodily participation, ordinary people especially the poor, the abandoned, marginalized and those suffering most in this crisis, are acknowledged as active agents in societal, church and cultural change.

If we look at people's 'performances' in daily life in this unprecedented crisis, what kind of 'new normal' will we build up? What kind of society, and church for that matter, will the performances of ordinary people in this pandemic produce? What can we learn theologically? Theologizing from everyday life and practices in the homes and churches and in our daily relationship with creation, especially during this liminal pandemic time, produces a relevant theology, participated in and arising from

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<sup>4</sup> Turner, *Ritual Process*, 140.

<sup>5</sup> Hemispheric Institute, "Interview with Richard Schechner: What is Performance Studies" (2001) <https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/hidvl/hidvl-int-wips/item/1338-wips-rschechner.html>

<sup>6</sup> Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 35-36.

ordinary people. The new normal cannot be decreed by the government, it can only arise from new practices that hopefully make our lives better.

In this way of theologizing, we hope to reappropriate the theology of the body for our time. A Body Theology becomes an embodiment of the gospel in everyday life, windows to ecclesial and social participation in a time that forces all to change or die. We hope that the theological reflections on this paper are not just ideals but a lived theology – enacted and performed as practices in local communities. In doing so, theology can be both “personal and political”, the focus on bodies makes all “agents and vehicles of divine disclosure”.<sup>7</sup>

Pope Francis sees the pandemic as a chance to develop new ways of living: “The pandemic has brought us to a crossroads. We must use this decisive moment to end our superfluous and destructive goals and activities and to cultivate values, connections and activities that are lifegiving.”<sup>8</sup>

## **B. The Pandemic Experience in Asia**

As the year 2021 ends, just as most countries started opening their borders and the local business scenes are becoming active again, a new mutation of the Covid-19 virus called Omicron supposedly more powerful in spreading the virus than Delta forced all to bring back restrictions on travel, gatherings, etc. to stem its spread. At this point, all over Asia, governments are quite aggressive in having their citizens vaccinated and most countries are attempting to reach 70% - the so-called herd immunity - of their population vaccinated very soon.

FABC-OTC commenced writing our reflections in August 2021, while almost all countries are experiencing the deadly Delta virus. It was January 2022 when we started editing, the time of

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<sup>7</sup> Elaine Graham, *Words made Flesh: Women, Embodiment and Practical Theology* (London: SCM, 2009), 109.

<sup>8</sup> Message of Pope Francis for the 6<sup>th</sup> World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, Sept 1, 2021.

Omicron. Until now in June, the situation is still changing. But the following section is the context of our countries when we started reflecting theologically. These are not updated nor scientific and systematic data, which we can get from the daily news. As the first step of our participatory theological framework, our context-sharing below is participant observation - our own (OTC) experience and opinion as we too are immersed in this pandemic and as church ministers deeply in touch too with the experiences of our people and local communities<sup>9</sup>. It is important also for us to see that even with such an unprecedented global crisis and its continuing challenges, we see a lot of opportunities for renewal and change.

## **I The Challenges We are Facing**

The pandemic situation in Asia might perhaps be similar to the rest of the globe but we would like to note some important aspects from the different regions.

### Governance:

Governments declared a nation-wide lockdown by the end of March 2020 which lasted for many months. Some governments were not prepared to face this pandemic and hence lost control over it. Improper management, lack of skill, insufficient material resources and above all corruption in the higher level made the situation more complex and people's lives endangered. The lockdown brought much distress to the different strata of society. Many migrant workers had to walk hundreds of kilometres to reach home and that also caused death out of exhaustion and road accidents.

While India remains in the top 5 countries with the highest

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<sup>9</sup> The challenges and opportunities come from the sharing of our OTC members from different parts of Asia. We have subdivided ourselves into three subregions: East Asia (our members from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hongkong), South Asia (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka) and Southeast Asia (Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam). This paper uses the first person 'WE' because even if OTC has always practiced communal and contextual theologizing, the pandemic was an even more authentic collective experience.

number of cases globally, it has also produced its own vaccine. But the spread of the second wave of Covid-19 in India from April 2021 was very tragic. It was because people and the government systems falsely believed that the worst stage of the Covid situation was over, even after the warnings given by the health care experts. Many countries came to the help of India. The largest number of death and spread of Covid-19 took place in India during this second wave of Covid. But the third wave, Delta variant, was more manageable due to civic vigilance and health care preparedness.

Many South-East Asian governments failed to control the spread of the Covid-19 due to poor governance, massive corruption, and the lack of resources. The Philippine government towards the fourth quarter of 2021 has been critiqued for its seemingly ineffective response to the pandemic crisis, meaning it did not do its role of caring for its people to the best of its ability and resources. Its military approach to the crisis such as arresting and imprisoning people not wearing masks, including those who are on the streets begging for food, was stunning to many. On the other hand, the work of most local government units all over the country but especially in the national capital, were commendable – from organizing aid to the poorest and vulnerable to efficient and responsive medical systems with open and transparent communication. To date, however, the Philippines seems to have improved, the government as well as people’s cooperation, as cases were reduced drastically and vaccination efforts doubled. Vietnam on the other hand has been diligent from the start due to its proximity to China. The ministry of health has developed very scientific procedures to spot out, trace and confine the victims and those in close contact with them. Military camps or public centers were mobilized to admit people for confinement and provide them freely with food, shelter and medical treatment. But this method became ineffective as infection and death tolls reached their peaks. Some governments were apparently confused and changed their policies almost weekly to adapt to the situation. Many sick and dying people were not taken care of; many died alone, without relatives or medical workers and nobody knew for

sure where their bodies went, cremated individually or buried collectively.

Some East Asian governments from the very beginning of the pandemic, imposed very severe immigration restrictions: many conventions and international events were cancelled, meetings and gatherings were held online, which have excessively reduced the movement of people. However, May 2021 saw a breakdown of the controls resulting in a soaring infection rate.

By December 2021, East Asia has effectively controlled the spread of the virus: few or almost no cases continuing to decrease. Like all countries, stricter border controls have been issued but more relaxed in their own homelands. Vaccination rates are at 70-80% of the population and increasing. Taiwan who has issued a 'Covid Carefree Vaccination Policy Program' which allows foreign nationals such as overstaying foreigners (including unreported overstayers or undocumented migrant workers, detainees, detainees who are on a temporary release) to receive vaccination at sites designated by the Disease Control Agency (clinics, hospitals, churches, temples or other NGO sites such as the Catholic Archdiocese of Taipei, Chinese Muslim Association, R.O.C. Community Sustainable Development Association). They will not be seized in the vaccination area and no report will be given to law enforcement agencies. Free vaccination and the vaccination name list will not be a legal ground for investigation. Japan, even at the height of the Delta variant, pushed through successfully with the Olympics and Paralympics (Aug-Sept 2021) without spectators and after a one-year postponement. There was no mandatory lockdown but voluntary self-restraint.

#### Medical Concerns:

Enjoying a high standard of professionalism and rich in financial resources, the medical system in the East Asian region especially Hongkong and Taiwan have been doing an excellent job fighting the pandemic, evident in the very low death rate. Vaccines are in abundant supply, as this region enjoys economic

affluence. The problem was some people are reluctant to take it, as they were skeptical of its possible side-effects.

On the other hand, in South and South East Asia, poor medical systems due to lack of financial resources were common experiences; hospital beds in India were not sufficient even during normal times. There was also shortage of vaccine supply, even if some sectors of the population were also reluctant to be vaccinated. With an exponential surge of Covid patients, the situation was desperate and pathetic. The hospitals for a few times have really been full to the brim, even to the point of patients waiting outside the hospitals hoping to be attended to or even dying while traveling from one hospital to the next. There was acute shortage of ICU beds and oxygen supply. The situation was made even worse because of vaccination delays and mismanagement, the result of corruption. When oxygen and essential medicines ran short, black marketing began.

Concurrently the research on corona virus vaccine also improved in India, which had the capacity of large-scale vaccine production units. In collaboration with AstraZeneca BioPharmaceutical firm, the same product of AstraZeneca vaccine was produced under the name Covishield, as well as the Indian made vaccine Covaxin at a very larger scale and even supplied those vaccines to many developing countries in the world. All over Asia, medical and health workers- doctors, nurses, and assistants - have been heroes of this pandemic even as they appealed for help in their physical and emotional tiredness. The courage and sacrifice of medical workers are immense and admirable; most of them put medical ethics over their own safety or comfort (e.g. some mothers separated for a long time from their baby children; some not going home for the funerals of their parents, etc).

#### Economic Impacts:

The economies were severely hit resulting in a deep recession in 2020. The unemployment rate continued to soar as firms and stores downsize their workforce after severe cuts of

sales and revenues, especially in the export and tourism industries. Millions of people lost jobs. Migrant laborers had to return home. Many did not get regular salary. Business, tourism, travel, and industry were all adversely impacted. In Korea, some took to the streets to highlight their financial difficulties. Even those who have regular incomes were not financially secure. Families must shoulder extra expenses to have internet connection and electronic equipment such as computers, etc.

The gross domestic product was at its lowest and inflation highest in many decades. Prices of petrol, diesel, vegetables, fruits, oil, sugar, etc. were all sky-rocketing. The shutdown of all economic activities overnight resulted in so many micro and small enterprises being closed down. As someone observed: "If immediate measures are not taken more people will die of poverty than of Covid-19." In Thailand, though the government introduced fiscal packages (soft loans, debt payments extension, tax benefits, support for households including reducing and delaying utility bills, employment-related measures, economic stimulus and other measures), after more than a year of the pandemic, the government was running out of money and the help offered was never enough to face the needs.

The whole situation, nevertheless, has been improving since early 2021. Towards December in Taiwan, economic activities, especially manufacturing and export industries continued to flourish. In contrast, the domestic service industry had a huge employment population.

#### Ecological Impacts:

The extensive use of medical consumables, such as protective garments, face masks, disinfectants and injection needles for vaccination, etc. together with an extra consumption of water and electricity, brings about an ecological disaster. For some countries, the regulatory policies for plastic waste management were relaxed. The temporary permission on the excessive use of regulated plastic consumables for pandemic

prevention and control result even more plastic waste. The careless and improper disposal of masks, PPE kits, PCR test kits, vaccine syringes, etc. is hazardous to the environment. The constant use of masks can also be dangerous to health due to lack of oxygen. As it is, our cities are highly polluted and the pandemic has added to the filth of the environment. Wearing of masks for most of the time, PPE kits by doctors and nurses on duty and by others during funerals, and social distancing, etc. have been a great challenge to the people's health and lives, as it is very inconvenient, especially in the hot climate.

Our lives are gradually relying on internet communication, which drive the development of virtual communication and economy, as well as tele-medicine. Social lives at all levels have been severely affected because of the lockdowns. Women's burdens have further increased as they juggle work from home, management of the household, caring for the health of the family, and guiding their children in their online classes. Many students, who are tired of and inattentive to the web-based mode of learning, have lost interests in their studies. People who are infected with the virus, together with their family members, are suffering from tremendous emotional stress, especially those who lost loved ones. To add to the loss of job, lockdowns, and dwindling business incomes, the panic buying of daily and pandemic-related consumables pushes the stress level to historical heights. In Korea, a psychological pathology called "Corona Blue" has affected many. The pandemic also brings about xenophobia, namely discrimination of foreigners, hence cultures. All foreigners are considered as carrier of the virus. Foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong were obliged to take Covid-19 tests which has triggered human rights concerns. From an international macro perspective, a big gap between rich and poor countries was clearly seen. Developed countries in control of vaccine production inevitably gains the upper hand, which renders the distribution of vaccines a diplomatic tool, rather than a medical and humanitarian consideration.

With the pandemic, sickness in the world has increased hundredfold. The pandemic has created great fear and panic in most people, and many going into depression and mental sicknesses, leading to suicide in some cases. In one study in Vietnam, there was a 38% increased rate of anxiety/depression<sup>10</sup>; in the Philippines, an increase in suicide cases and mental health issues especially among the young. For those who are living alone, especially our senior citizens, their confinement to one physical space makes them lonelier. Many died lonely deaths as no relative could visit them in the hospital. Sadly, many of the deceased did not even get a decent and dignified funeral. People were so threatened that they stay away from those who are infected by Covid-19. Though social distancing deepened relationships within the family bubble, it weakened bonds with those outside the bubble. People are not allowed to gather for meals, sports, social activities, and so on. Many felt isolated and easily got depressed. Moreover, increase in domestic violence cases has been reported. The sense of community belonging was also much reduced, social inertia grew. Even now when shops and public activities were allowed to reopen, there are still not so many to frequent those places or activities.

Schools, colleges, universities and other educational institutes remain closed for a long time. Online classes were being conducted in the context of poor infrastructures and lack of good internet connections, with the quality of education greatly compromised. As a result, students have lost interest in their studies. Young students were mentally distressed which resulted in psychological trauma. On the other hand, many young people got addicted even more to electronic devices and social media and spending time on things which are ethically wrong.

Church Life:

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.565153/full>, accessed on June 12, 2021.

Church services, pastoral activities, and sacraments took a severe battering due to the pandemic. Most of the services were cancelled or have to be held online. In these trying circumstances, it is a big challenge to keep people connected to God and to spiritually strengthen them when they cannot come to Church and priests are not able to visit or meet them. In many places, pastors/priests have neglected people entrusted to them out of fear of contracting the disease. This situation causes anguish among mature and faithful church goers and may alienate the youth further. The banning of normal church activities such as choir practicing, Bible sharing, catechetical/theological formation, BECs, and the like has a strong impact on the faithful's sense of belonging. On the other hand, the ban on ministering sacraments, visiting the sick and the dying has inflicted much pain on those in need, and profoundly distorting church lives. This is obvious now when even Churches are re-open for Mass, many people still don't dare to go to Mass, preferring attending Mass online.

## **II The Opportunities We are Seeing**

In different parts of Asia – East, South, Southeast – opportunities are rising up in the midst of the difficult and seemingly unending challenges.

Scientific and technological innovation:

Innovative sciences and technologies in areas of talent cultivation, accumulation of scientific research capabilities, guided by the principle of innovation, tolerance, and sustainability, are being developed to counter-balance impacts of the pandemic. The need to engage our activities online has sparked the creative fire, which has boosted a wave of scientific and technological innovation leading to the development of advanced communication tools and related products in business, medical, government, church, etc. In medical systems, research and innovation are happening fast. Pharmaceutical companies all over the world, including those in India and Indonesia, have been engaging in intensive research to produce preventive vaccines.

Medical professionals and health workers are being trained to combat this and perhaps future pandemics.

#### Ecological benefits:

The pandemic has given Mother Nature a restful period: the sky has cleared up and the sun showers its golden rays upon the earth. The cancellation of flights together with fewer vehicles on the road contributed to a drastic drop of the pollution index. The pandemic is pushing people back to a temporary state of nature sustenance. Online meetings and gatherings dramatically reduced all forms of travel. Though short-lived, ecological benefits are significant.

Many local and international conferences/meetings are being conducted online, sharply reducing the need for air-travel and related consumption, which in itself is positive in preserving the ecological environment, especially in cleaner air. The pandemic lockdowns resulted in less energy consumption as businesses, schools, churches closed or operated in a limited way. The call for a sustainable environment affects all – businesses, infrastructures, lifestyles – and could even spell survival for humanity and the planet.

#### Economic benefits:

New needs give rise to new forms of economic activities. Pandemic lockdowns have given birth to new forms of business: home-courier services, meals and daily necessities are being ordered online. Working from home has become a new way of business proceeding. The pandemic has pushed people's innovative thinking to a new level.

#### Social Life:

People from different social classes, casts, religions, cultures and walks of lives are coming together to work for the common good. The pandemic has ignited the fire of charity and interconnectedness in the human heart. We begin to be aware of the human and global family. Simply wearing masks, keeping

social distance, abstaining from gathering, etc. was seen as being responsible for the other. Some see the apparent lower number of infections in Asian countries compared to others also come from dutifully and voluntarily wearing masks and following other safety protocols, perhaps as part of a communal sense of living. Many people are risking their lives reaching out to the poor and those in need, offering whatever material or spiritual support as deemed necessary, e.g. community pantries and different forms of solidarity (rice ATM, facemask ATM, etc.) were set up in so many places in Vietnam, the Philippines and elsewhere. International cooperation is seen with some rich countries offering a helping hand to poor countries by sharing vaccines and needed commodities. Japan donated one million shots of vaccines each to Taiwan, Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand.

The pandemic lockdowns have created more opportunities for the family to stay together. The pandemic has abruptly slowed down the pace of our lives and became a time for more personal reflection, activities and growth.

#### Church Life:

Pandemic lockdowns have forced the Church to conduct liturgies online. The closing down of parishes and the deprivation of sacraments have aroused the faithful's deeper need for God, which becomes a driving force for the deepening of their faith. The Church has developed new forms of pastoral care, including pastoral counseling, both online and offline for individuals, families, and BECs. New communication platforms are also being developed for charitable organizations and the like to raise their most-needed funds. The pandemic has promoted inter-religious activities. Catholic schools are given the opportunity for evangelization to non-Christian students. In the midst of the pandemic, the Good News opens students' eyes and minds to a new horizon of existential meanings. In order to cater for the needs of the poor as a result of the pandemic, the Church has become more mission-oriented, enabling it to shift from inward-looking to outward-looking. The Church is also encouraged to adapt herself

to new forms of technologies. Moreover, she was able to grasp the opportunity to learn the “language” of young people and the world. The pandemic has also enabled the Church to see the necessity of building BECs, which has practically become the only form of Church gathering during the lockdowns, and have contributed tremendously in all works of mission - from pastoral care to evangelization, charitable services to promotion of faith and justice. The lockdown of the Church has also enabled the faithful to reflect on the crucial importance of liturgies and sacraments. Deprivation has left a void in their hearts, which has cultivated in them a sense of thirst for the Paschal Mystery (the Eucharist) and the Church (the Body of Christ).

The healing touch of the Holy Spirit drives away the fear of the pandemic. People feel absolutely helpless and powerless in the face of the pandemic, which brings suffering and death and has fostered the need to reflect on the meanings of suffering, existence, and ultimate concern. It is time to practice a spirituality of “Kairos moment”- the pandemic as “God’s favorable time” to explore new horizons and to create something different. The Christian population as a whole and many social work agencies of the non-governmental organization sector worked well to help all needy and affected people socially, psychologically and spiritually. As a result, the sense of one-body-of-humanity has emerged.

Fundamental questions:

We are also forced to reflect on meanings of our existence, the universal, and our ultimate concern. This world is but only a pilgrimage. We are in the world but not of it. What is the destiny of our existence? And of humanity? These are questions we don’t usually probe into. The pandemic has pushed us to explore a new horizon we used to ignore but has become our concern now. On the personal level, this could be a time for depth and wisdom for those whose life activities have to be postponed. They have a chance to pause from usual activities and therefore go deep to those normally less paid attention to (such as family or old friends

contacts and meetings, reading, learning and reflection, writing and artistic products, etc.). Some social questions were also raised: What insights and inspiration have we gained from the pandemic about human rights and responsibilities vis-à-vis freedoms? Some countries are sacrificing one for the sake of the other. What are the anthropological principles leading to a right balance between human rights and public health when considering a pandemic lockdown? The pandemic has also forced our Asian societies to ask questions and review our medical systems, interest in the socially disadvantaged, basic income issues, role of religion, among other things.

## **Part 2: EMBODYING THE FAITH**

How did the faithful in different parts of Asia embody their faith in Jesus as lived in their families, in their local churches and in their ecological situation? This main part of the paper reflects on these three areas as manifestations of the Body of Christ. How does the Body of Christ suffering and healing at the same time provide a collective faith wisdom needed for church, societal and ecological renewal after such an unprecedented pandemic crisis?

### **A. In Families**

Family has its social and secular aspects as well as its religious and sacred dimension. Considered as “the primary vital cell of society” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem* 11), a “school for human enrichment” (*Gaudium et Spes* 52), family plays an important role in all cultures, but it is difficult to be universally defined. Different definitions have variously emphasized the biological, residential or functional aspects. Though family created by kinship and marriage is the most basic form, the legitimate sphere of family may be broader; for example, adoptions are familiar in most societies. People in all cultures live in some kind of residential setting with members of their families, but family should be distinguished from a household, which may include boarders and roomers; while members of the same family with deep sense of mutual belonging may live in different households or even

nations. Reproduction and protection of life, the education and socialization of children, economic and psychological support are considered as central functions of the family.

All branches of the three “Abrahamic faiths”, i.e., Judaism, Islam and Christianity have emphasized family as an important part of religious belief and practice, but only Christianity has a “Holy Family” (Jesus, Mary, Joseph).<sup>11</sup> “*The incarnation of the Word in a human family, in Nazareth, by its very newness changed the history of the world.*” (AL 65) Christians are centered on the life and teachings of Jesus as the basis for strong marriages and families; the goal of many devout Christian parents is to build a “Christ-centered home”.

## I. FAMILY AS THE DOMESTIC BODY OF CHRIST

While families are considered as the fundamental ‘building block’ of society, they also provide a foundation for the continuation and strength of the Church among the lay faithful.

Family is the context of personal growth and development, where each person is brought up into being, acquiring self-understanding and self-identification, and progressively being introduced by means of education into the human community, starting from one’s nuclear family, then amplified to extended family, local community, bigger society, state, nation and the global world.

“Families are the domestic Church”, Pope Francis said (*Lumen Gentium* 7), because it is “where Jesus grows; he grows in the love of spouses, he grows in the lives of children”<sup>12</sup>. Since the beginning of Christianity, family, as the *oikos tou theou*, is the first place where Christians, especially young, baptized Christians learn about their faith. By means of the rebirth in baptism and education in the faith, they are introduced and gradually

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<sup>11</sup> Dollahite, David. (2016). Christianity and Families. 10.1002/9781119085621.wbef543.

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/june/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140601\\_rinnovamento-spirito-santo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/june/documents/papa-francesco_20140601_rinnovamento-spirito-santo.html).

integrated into God's family, the Church, starting from the domestic church, and then amplified to the parochial, diocesan and universal Church. In Asia, liturgy and the sacraments are usually requested to be celebrated in the family, particularly in special occasions such as funeral or in assisting the dying, where the family, friends, and people in the neighborhood join together in a full expression of the Church.

Also in Asia, apart from those baptized since childhood, there are many adult converts and many of them are probably the only Christians in their families, which might be called as "domestic church in frontier" or "domestic church in mission", for their lives of witness in the family extends the presence of the Church in mission.

The Mystical Body of Christ, an important metaphor used by St. Paul, designates the essence and the self-understanding of the Church, emphasizing the mysterious connection, interwoven relationship and solidarity among members with one another and with the head-Jesus Christ.

This metaphor can be applied to the individual, both believers and non-believers. Man, created according to the image of God, is a "mystery" and *"only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. (GS 22) "In the human nature united to Himself the Son of God, by overcoming death through His own death and resurrection, redeemed man and re-molded him into a new creation. By communicating His Spirit, Christ made His brothers, called together from all nations, mystically the components of His own Body." (LG 7) However, not only "the believers who, through the sacraments, are united in a hidden and real way to Christ who suffered, died and was glorified", but all people are invited to participate into this mysterious union with Christ, since "the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery." (GS 22)*

If this metaphor is applied to the “Church”, the assembly of people of God, be it universal, diocesan, parochial or domestic, the Body of Christ is manifested or actualized in all these four-level churches, and each can be analogized to some extent as the Body of Christ. If one member of the family suffers, the whole family as a body suffers with him. This human suffering will produce impact on the human nature of Christ, who as Head of this body, suffers in us and with us, and when He unites ours to His own, our humble human sufferings may shed a new light of salvific meaning.

### **1. Family in its Corporeal and Spiritual Dimensions**

The family, the domestic Body of Christ, composes of human persons who are endowed with the gift of body (corporeal aspect) and soul (spiritual aspect). The human person is an embodied-spirit. It means that the corporeal dimension (the body) is not in opposition to the spiritual dimension (soul), but serves as “a locus of experience for the unity of the human person”.<sup>13</sup> The unity of the corporeal and spiritual aspects of the human persons who constitute the family, enables them to know and act on their potentialities and limitations<sup>14</sup> and make them capable of having a deeper understanding of the self, others and God.

Aside from the corporal and spiritual aspects of the human persons who form the family, every family consists of its own corporeal and spiritual dimensions which are respectively related to the body and spirit of the human person. The corporeal aspect of the family may consist of various material or physical forms, structures or means for individual human persons to form together one family, e.g. the individuals' common biological

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<sup>13</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*. Trans. M. Waldstein, Boston 2006: Pauline Books and Media, 133:1, 659.

<sup>14</sup>Kathleen A. Kalb, Ph.D., RN, “Lessons from Pope John Paul II: 'Theology of the Body' Underpins Health Care,” *Journal of the Catholic Health Association of the United States*, March-April 2012, <https://www.chausa.org/publications/health-progress/article/march-april-2012/lessons-from-pope-john-paul-ii-'theology-of-the-body'-underpins-health-care>.

heritage or common legal status, a common residing place, a common structure of life together, etc. The spiritual aspects are those relating to the bonding love and respect among the individuals as dignified person worthy of respect and love. These two aspects are intimately related to make the family truly itself, truthful to its nature. The external forms and structures are themselves the fruits of the love between family members and are meant to express as well as nurture that love. Vice versa, the love between family members needs and requires expressions in those common external forms and structures.

In a theological sense, the Christian family<sup>15</sup> is characterized by its relation to the Mystical Body

and Spirit of Christ: it is part of the Mystical Body of Christ and is enlivened by His Spirit. Now, the Body of Christ is truly Herself only as far as She is enlivened and nurtured by His Spirit (cf. LG 4). There is no Body of Christ without the Spirit and vice versa. If the Christian family is part of and constitutive of the Mystical Body of Christ, it is also by nature permeated, enlivened and nurtured by the Spirit. If being part of the Body of Christ makes the Christian family more authentically truthful to its own nature, the ever dynamic Spirit also makes the family truly and gradually become itself as the domestic Body of Christ (cf. LG 11; *Familiaris Consortio* 21).

## **2. Family and the Covid-19 Pandemic**

The family's two dimensions when viewed in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, all the more reveal the intimate interrelation between them. This interrelation is manifested most vividly in the suffering and healing of the family during the pandemic. It struck both the corporeal and spiritual dimensions of family life, but the unquenchable spirit of the human persons may

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<sup>15</sup> In its explicit and implicit form (when faith in Christ is implicit). The term "Christian family" may also connote the Christian way of looking at the family in general and does not necessary denote a class of family separated from others.

survive the strike and help make up for and heal the wounded corporeal aspects<sup>16</sup>.

From the theological point of view, during the pandemic, in as much as the family suffers when the Whole Body of Christ suffers, it is also healed and revived by His Spirit. That also suggests that the one condition for the Christian family to be truly healed and revived is to be part of the Body of Christ and to share Its Spirit.

In this paper we will have opportunity to look back at the suffering and healing of the family and whereby, to contemplate the suffering Body of Christ and His healing Spirit at work in family life.

## II. FAMILY AS THE SUFFERING BODY OF CHRIST

With the continuous outbreak of pandemic, it is difficult to capture in words how much or how far families in Asia, especially in the poor and densely populated countries, and also in other parts of the world have suffered. Stories of pains and sufferings within the families are many. There are families where almost all members are Covid-19 positive; there are those who are heartbroken with the death of their loved ones. The “solitary deaths” of family members, while being isolated in hospitals or quarantine areas, was a painful experience for the living family members who are left behind, who are traumatized and have no

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<sup>16</sup> The family's corporeal aspect of suffering can be related to the infected body of the human family members who suffer from pain and death, as the highest form of human suffering in life. It can also be negative effects that the pandemic causes on the external structures of the family, due to which the human family went from bodily sufferings to spiritual sufferings. For example: family social gatherings and activities, religious worship and practices, funerals are significant disruptions in family life cycle. Absence of family members at the hospitals and deathbed of their infected family members, burying the remains without religious rituals, sudden death, brings trauma, much sorrow and pain to living family members. In short, the human body suffers from hunger, illness, isolation and separation from the beloved, dying, death or any distressing sensation in the body, while the human spirit suffers from fear, anxiety, uncertainty, helplessness, hopelessness, depression, etc. But when the human spirit, especially when endowed with faith and love of the Spirit of Christ, overcomes those obstacles, much of the sufferings in the family could be alleviated or even lessened and healed.

choice but to face and accept the reality of dying and death in the family. Despite the common knowledge of the reality that sickness, dying and death are inevitable part of the cycle of human life, many families still find it hard to accept the death of their loved ones. In the meantime, they have to struggle to protect themselves from the same danger of death and to survive with the thinning opportunities even to acquire basic needs amidst the ongoing pandemic crisis. It has also been noticed in many countries that mental health issues such as clinical depression and trauma, and in some cases suicide, have increased.

On the social level, the pandemic has brought a comprehensive impact on all aspects of family lives - social, political, economic and spiritual. Border closures, trade restrictions and confinement measures have forced many businesses to shut down resulting in loss of income for families. As for the life of faith, families can no longer go to Church, for all liturgical services are suspended and attending Mass online can not make up for the lack of sacramental celebrations.

We will now look at this suffering from two points of view, one is negative, the other is positive. Just as Christ suffered for our sins and out of love for the Father and for us, the domestic church's suffering can also be categorized as being derived from our sins and from our loving acceptance of it for the sake of others.

### **1. Suffering as Consequence of a Sinful Spirit**

The virus of Covid-19 is not solely responsible for our sufferings which most of the time are derived from our own sickness in spirit. This pandemic, during which it is the poor who suffer most, is like a magic mirror, reflecting and revealing the deeper nature of many existing social problems such as the manipulation of big-power games, geopolitical conflicts, government corruption, economic fragility, under-the-counter operations of the financial system, uneven distribution of resources and wealth which are tilted toward the rich, the disparity between the rich and the poor is accelerated and

widened, the middle class is gradually disappearing, the inflation is about to explode, etc.

Being surrounded by and living in a sinful structured society, we may confess and assume partial responsibility for this global pandemic, such as our excessive bias of anthropocentrism, lack of respect for mother nature, pursuing economic growth at any cost, etc. However, it is difficult to identify who are the perpetrators or oppressors. Due to the global operation and detailed division of labor, many vested interests have been dissolved in countless operations behind the scenes, and the line between the oppressors and the exploited has been blurred. Individuals and families are undergoing painful experiences, overwhelmed by the feelings of uncertainty and loss of control of their future, but unable to identify the cause of the sufferings and the guilty party to take responsibility. We can only say the perpetrator of suffering lays deeply in our social structures and way of life, in which we ourselves partake.

In some countries, there are even opportunistic people who make use of this crisis to gain personal or group benefits. Stealing and robbery occur more often on the streets. Internet fraud increased as more people while lockdown at home need to buy or arrange everything online. Even at national levels, corruption or delay in spending vaccine funds, uneven distribution of vaccines due to bribery, negligence of patients in quarantine centers, etc. have denied many people of their surviving chance. Rigid or even military enforced lockdown just to facilitate management tasks have pushed many poor people to situations of utmost tragedy without being noticed, unable to be helped by the civil community.

On personal and family level, some families suffer from the breakdown of interpersonal relationships due to economic problems, forced proximity as a result of quarantine measures, etc., which induced some domestic violence in the family. The egoistic refusal to sacrifice small comfortabilities or pleasures (e.g. refusal to wear face mask, to keep distances, to refrain from going

out, etc.) makes us a threat to the life of others especially those vulnerable such as the elderly. The abandonment, out of fear or indifference, with which we leave our elderly alone, struggling with the virus or dying without notice is another vivid sign of our sickness in human spirit.

All these above sufferings are the result of the egoistic spirit of the "discarding culture" which considers no life is as important as oneself's or one's comfortability and is ready discard anything, even people.

On the spiritual level, fear and anxiety in this crisis could also trigger spiritual doubt or even defiance of God. In a desperate search for someone to blame, people may resort to blaming God for God's absence and lack of action or even thinking that God causes this pandemic. This spiritual defiance will surely manifest itself in anger toward their fellow human beings, starting from their own family members. But is this the whole picture or can we see the other side of suffering during this pandemic?

## **2. Suffering as Carrying the Cross**

Let us step back from our own suffering and contemplate Christ himself who also suffered our human tragedy. In Luke 23:27-31 Jesus said, "Weep not for me, but for yourselves". Jesus' suffering on the Calvary is a suffering on our behalf. Even while suffering, Jesus showed concern for others' sufferings. In John. 19:25-27, Jesus made room in his heart for the others even during His own suffering on the cross ("Woman, here is your son... here is your mother"). He saw and had compassion for His mother, Mary and the beloved disciple who are in deep sorrow at the foot of His Cross. Jesus embraced his suffering on the cross and therefore rebuked Peter as Satan for Peter was trying to prevent Him from going in the way of the cross (Matthew 16:21-23).

Such contemplation of Christ carrying the cross finds its resonance vividly in so many families during this Covid-19 pandemic. There were also inevitable sufferings that the family members freely and lovingly accept or voluntarily assume for the

sake of others. Aside from heroic acts of fruitful suffering like those of medical or health-care volunteers who risk their lives to serve the dying or severe patients at hospitals, the family members' small gestures of loving suffering also prove to be fruitful. Voluntary self-confinement in case one is Covid-19 positive is a lonely experience but becomes a sign of love and responsibility for others in the family. Those who are well sacrifice their jobs and their time to take care of their sick at home, giving them the comfort of their presence and help. Even in case the sick is to be carried away, to be treated at the confinement centers or hospitals, the family members' suffering out of their earnest love for the sick, though unable to serve him/her in concrete, warms his/her heart, etc. Dying alone is an even deeper experience of suffering and solitude and can only find meaning with the model of Christ' solitude on the cross when he felt abandoned by God Himself (cf. Mt 27,46). Looking up at Christ on the Cross becomes a spiritual experience that turns their minds and hearts to all those who are suffering, thinking of them fondly with love and praying for them.

In that way, the experience of suffering and death of the modern-day Christian families is not unlike that of Christian martyrs in the past. Let us think of the persecuted early Christians under the Roman empire (e.g. Emperor Nero in 64 AD), or the Christians during the Black Death in the Middle Ages and Spanish Flu in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Like theirs, our sufferings today can also be associated with the "Cross of Jesus in Golgotha which became a symbol of hope and courage to bear all sufferings"<sup>17</sup>.

### III. THE HEALING SPIRIT OF CHRIST IN THE FAMILY

The Mystical Body of Christ is suffering greatly in the families due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but thanks to Its Spirit Who is the Spirit of the Risen One Himself, the Body of Christ, as always, is reviving most strongly despite everything.

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<sup>17</sup>Pope Benedict XVI Audiences (Message), 2008. The Importance of Christology: the Theology of the Cross. St. Peter's Square, Vatican.

While the suffering of the Body of Christ may be described both in its sinful and grace-filled dimensions (as the Cross), the healing of the Body of Christ in the family could also be realized both in its human and divine dimensions, as metanoia and under the banner of the Risen One.

### **1. Metanoia in the Family**

While betraying our sinful conditions, the Covid-19 pandemic also invites and creates appropriate conditions for us to repent as well as to change our minds and our actions.

Firstly, metanoia begins with the awareness of our vulnerability and shortcomings in family life. Just as our individual bodies are vulnerable to the tiny virus, our family with its such natural conditions as material settings, physical presence, behavior codes, structures and disciplines, etc. is also vulnerable to the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>18</sup>. The pain and disintegration that the pandemic instills on family life might invoke in us the awareness and regret of our own breaking-up of family life long before the pandemic existed. For some families, locked down in their houses for long periods of time without the possibilities of ‘escape’, brought out long standing issues and conflicts. The pandemic that strikes our bodies could betray a deeper disease of our soul that has for long separated us from one another in the family and has been destroying our family life. Self-realization and acknowledgement of our own tragedy is the beginning of a healing process.

Secondly, on the spiritual level, the pandemic can also be seen as an opportunity to be stripped of our pride and our egoistic way of doing things. It helps us rebuild goodness in our hearts<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> e.g. Isolation has to take place even inside the family when someone gets infected. Family members living and away cannot come home for gatherings as usual. In extreme cases, family members die alone in hospital or isolation center which is deeply painful to an Asian family who usually spends several days of mourning and gives public funeral for their deceased, etc.

<sup>19</sup>Kathleen A. Kalb, Ph.D., RN, “Lessons from Pope John Paul II: 'Theology of the Body' Underpins Health Care,” Journal of the Catholic Health Association of the United

and to realize that total healing during this pandemic consists in doing things in God's way. In the light of faith, these sufferings in the families serve as "limit experience", triggering in us the deepest longing for communion with God, with one another and with our neighbors.<sup>20</sup>

During the pandemic, opportunities are given us to realize how much we take one another for granted and how much we need one another in the family. During the lockdowns, it is common to witness how much more happy and active are the children, when their parents had to stay home with no job. We realize how essential the parents', especially the mother's presence to the child in daily life is, and it could be said vice versa. During the pandemic, we realize how often we value work and salary more than our own children as well as their and our own well-being. Being aware of the precious gift that we ourselves are to one another is the moment of metanoia but also the moment of family happiness and revival. It is the Spirit of Love who makes us realize that we are such precious gifts to one another beyond our own worthiness or actions. It is the pure love of the child that highly values the father's or mother's presence, and only a loving parent could realize that for himself or herself, could live up to that love and experience the mutual feelings and valuation. It is the Spirit who makes the family a happy place to live, not for any reasons other than its own existence.

**\* The Spirit of repentance and the Body of forgiveness.**

Metanoia is not just any experience of regret or awareness, but an experience in the context of our relation with God. The focus of the experience of metanoia is not ourselves but God whose love is everlasting and abundant despite our sinfulness and

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States, March-April 2012, <https://www.chausa.org/publications/health-progress/article/march-april-2012/lessons-from-pope-john-paul-ii-'theology-of-the-body'-underpins-health-care>.

<sup>20</sup> Swantek, Zachary. (2019). "John Paul II's Theology of the Suffering Body. The Person and the Challenges", *The Journal of Theology, Education, Canon Law and Social Studies*. 9. 65. 10.15633/pch.3363.

brokenness . It is the Spirit – God's Love – who leads us to an authentic and healthy experience of repentance. Salvation does not stop short with repentance, which leads to conversion for integrating oneself to the divine economy in progress. Repentance, even though is itself God's grace, remains a preparation for forgiveness, a grace we receive from God alone. And God wills that we receive forgiveness in the Body of Christ, with all its corporeal aspects just as we ourselves are corporeal and we need to experience forgiveness in our body as well as in our spirit. The experience of metanoia in the family must lead to the experience of forgiveness, which is possible only when the family lives up to its identity as the domestic Body of Christ and which should be manifested and realized in all corporeal aspects of family life. Those moments of forgiveness realized in the family include the reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and ultimately the family's peak of existence when its members gather together for the Eucharist and partake the same sacramental Body of Christ. Those sacramental moments of healing and belongingness are to be prolonged in the family's daily life in its common structures, activities and other corporeal aspects.

## **2. Resurrection in Family Life**

The Covid-19 pandemic can be itself an opportunity for us to revive our spirit of love and respect for one another and, with that, to renew family life.

Firstly, the pandemic gives us more time to be together or to be close to one another. Proximity in isolation caused by the pandemic could create a shift in family life from busyness to “wasting time fruitfully” with family members. It provides the family members with wonderful opportunities to cultivate quality relationship with one another. Given the experience of metanoia that repel the sickness of the soul, proximity during the pandemic could help each individual live again as authentic family members and not as strangers living under the same roof. The family therefore may rise again to be more authentically itself in its corporeal and spiritual aspects.

Praying together, Bible sharing, attending Mass online together, sharing spiritual experience, discussing and planning together how to help other neighbors, etc. are moments when the Spirit and Body of Christ could be received and realized in the family. Liturgy can be understood as 'the work of the people' which is celebrated inside and even outside of the sanctuary.<sup>21</sup> The pandemic seems to revive the early Christians' way of worshipping, praying, listening to the Word of God, celebrating the Holy Eucharist (online) in the household churches, such as in the house of Aquila and Priscilla (1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:3, 5), of Philemon (Phil. 1, 2), and of Nympha in Laodicea (Col. 4:15).

Secondly, during the pandemic, family members could learn such family values as self-sacrifice, resilience, acceptance of discomfort and difference, to better listen to one another, mutual understanding and forgiveness, etc. Self-sacrifice, resilience, loving support and real presence expressed in taking care of family members who are infected have proved to be able not only to maintain family life but also to heal the infected from sickness and pain. The family of love, by its nature, possesses healing power; it could become the wounded healer by choosing to rise above the pains and sufferings caused by the pandemic<sup>22</sup>. Just as Christ's Resurrection comes after the Cross and Christ's death out of love, the family could revive even after being struck heavily by the pandemic when each family member accepts dying to self out of love. The pandemic gives a wonderful chance for us to do that.

For these values to be realized in daily life and not to remain abstract ideals, the grace of God is needed, accompanied by human resolution and effort, however limited they may be. Just as Christ's Resurrection is pure work of God on human reality, the

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<sup>21</sup>Jeff Clyde G. Corpuz & Philip Joseph D. Sarmiento. (2021). Going back to basics: experiencing *Domus ecclesiae* (House Church) in the celebration of the liturgy during Covid-19. To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2020.184145>.

<sup>22</sup> Albert L. Reyes, "As we grapple with Covid-19, let's remember that faith and love are vital components of healing," [dallasnews.com](https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/08/29/as-we-grapple-with-covid-19-lets-remember-that-faith-and-love-are-vital-components-of-healing/). August 28, 2020 , <https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/08/29/as-we-grapple-with-covid-19-lets-remember-that-faith-and-love-are-vital-components-of-healing/>.

revival of family life is not just based on the pandemic experience itself or on human effort, exercised individually or together. It is based on the ever-living Spirit of Christ the Risen received and lived out by human persons, in the human reality of the family.

### **\* Resurrection by way of faith**

According to St. Augustine, faith is the starting point for the comprehension of the questions of life and death, of pain and suffering<sup>23</sup>. As mentioned above, the pandemic may trigger many to lament saying "Oh God where are you in this pandemic!". However, lamentations are not necessarily an absence of faith, but can be interpreted as a call for a deeper faith understanding of God. It is only in the eyes of faith that we can learn to understand, accept and give meaning to the sufferings, pains and deaths that families are experiencing during this pandemic.

A research shows that, when families are being exposed to a threat like this pandemic, they use several strategies of survival; faith as one of those strategies, allows individuals and families to have hope and a sense of security<sup>24</sup>. The said research further underlines that because of Covid-19 pandemic, most people are much more open to faith and prayer, which gives them meaning and a sense of control over the situation.

## **IV. THE PANDEMIC AS LIMINAL SPACE FOR RENEWING FAMILY LIFE**

Crises and challenges do not necessarily lead to destruction or frustration, but rather open pathways towards a new beginning with hope and renewed spirit. The present pandemic situation will, sooner or later, turn to be the post-pandemic situation, and hence, the post-Covid era demands for a shift, change and

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<sup>23</sup>“Saint Augustine and Covid-19 Pandemic: The Future And Divine Providence” by Prof. Ikechuwu Anthony Kanu, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Tansian University Umunya, Anambra State.

<sup>24</sup> Kowalczyk, O., Roszkowski, K., Montane, X. et al. Religion and Faith Perception in a Pandemic of COVID-19. *J Relig Health* 59, 2671–2677 (2020).  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01088-3>

transformation in the pedagogy, attitude for a renewed family apostolate and ministry. It requires a renewed pastoral approach to revive the wounded body of Christ, the family, and to prepare it to be true tabernacle of life. Family, being the most basic unit of the society, the domestic church as well as the pivotal part of the mystical Body of Christ, needs to be taken care of. Seeing the present realities of the families infected by Covid pandemic, family apostolate is to be enhanced for a renewed pastoral pathways which may include the following:

### **1. New Paradigm for Pastoral Apostolate**

Among the pastoral programs, family apostolate is fundamental and essential. The traditional paradigm of family pastoral apostolate<sup>25</sup>, in the changing reality, especially in/ during the time of

pandemic, has become almost paralyzed, and hence, there is a need of a paradigm shift, for a new paradigm which will focus unfailingly and indispensably on the dignity of human person, the primacy of God's love prevailing in the family and that love extending in mission as families serve the church of the poor (FABC 151). The new paradigm entails creative renewal of areas as well as methods of family pastoral apostolate, which may be sketched as following:

#### **a. Family Counseling**

Covid-19 pandemic infected the Body of Christ in the family in its various aspects and caused in a special way mental as well as psychological pain, suffering and trauma, leaving it anxious, despaired, wounded and frustrated. This is a true reality for the parents, children and also for other members of the family. The family apostolate will open a branch of counseling with expertise, who will dedicate time in listening to their stories of pain and suffering, paying attention first of all to accompanying them in the

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<sup>25</sup> Family apostolate is considered as the heart of Pope Francis' Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "*Amoris Laetitia*".

process of grieving and mourning. Family members need time and space to go step by step in the process of self-consciousness and mourning of their loss during the pandemic. This can be done privately with the counselor or together in family or in groups under the counselor's guidance. The second step in family counseling is to guide them to the right track bringing healing, liberation from fear and raising joy, peace, hope and aspiration in mind for new beginning and healthy living. It would be helpful if the whole process of counseling be done not only professionally but also in the spiritual atmosphere of family as the domestic manifestation of the Body of Christ, where the mourning and healing process is carried out in the presence of Christ and with His Spirit.

#### **b. Pastoral Accompaniment and promotion of dialogue**

In conjunction with Family Counselling is pastoral accompaniment with the families who are wounded in various ways, especially due to the pandemic situation. This is a very intimate and close day-to-day journey with the married couples and with the family members; a journey done by the pastor, the family ministers, the community or the wounded families themselves with one another. In this process, listening with the ears of the compassionate and merciful heart to their struggles, challenges, difficulties, is essential for assisting and guiding them to make mature and prudent discernment of their particular situations of life and to provide them with necessary strength, techniques and ways to overcome challenging realities. The sad and tragic experience of loneliness and isolation caused by pandemic can be transformed into a joyful experience of closeness through this faithful pastoral approach of accompaniment. This is important in different stages and in every moment of joy and suffering, especially in the critical times of family life. The purpose of this renewed family apostolate as well as the pastoral care with tenderness is to help the wounded family to get the sense of belonging to the Church and to experience the unconditional love and mercy of God.

The renewed Family apostolate will also promote fruitful dialogue of love, life and sharing among the family members and with the ministers of the Church. Respecting and valuing the presence and dignity of each other; welcoming, listening and understanding each other with compassion and mercy are the values highly regarded in this dialogue. Effective and fruitful dialogue will emphasize on the closeness of hearts, quality time, valuing one another and keeping an open mind. This will give opportunity to deepen mutual relationship, to encourage the wounded and broken-hearted family members and to break down the dividing wall, to build a bridge of fraternity and friendship and to bring back peace and joy which were swiped away by the pandemic. No one is saved alone, only together can we be saved (*Fratelli Tutti*); therefore, pastoral accompaniment and dialogue will prepare families to fight together for life and to be saved together.

### **c. On-going Formation and Renewed Catechesis**

For the revival of the families, wounded by the infection of Covid, there is a constant need of on-going formation and renewed catechesis, especially following the Catechesis on the Pandemic that Pope Francis released in February 2021 entitled 'To Heal the World'. Family apostolate will enhance pastoral programs that will ensure the on-going formation, in such various aspects as ethical, moral, pastoral, social, religious, spiritual formation, especially wholistic health of the married couples, parents, their children and also for those who are actively engaged pastorally and professionally in family ministry. A renewed catechesis, especially informed by the pandemic, is essential for the faith formation, for deepening intimacy with and for helping family members to keep trust and faith in the omnipotence of God, after they experienced human fragility and helplessness and faith - crisis during the pandemic. Such renewed catechesis is intended to help families to be filled with the grace, strength and presence of God to fight together against any power that shakes the foundation of family life and come out victorious.

#### **d. Pro-life Program**

Family Life Apostolate have been proponents of pro-life programs of the Church especially in the area of natural family planning and responsible parenting. The renewed family apostolate will look at the death situations and specific threats to life that the pandemic has challenged the family with. It will facilitate motivational programs that will inspire the families to work for life and prepare them in a spiritual and psychological manner for welcoming life. It hopes to promote a culture of encounter among its various members; and will be a locus of multiple relationships, i.e., between parents and children, youth and elderly, brothers and sisters, family with other families, etc. The apostolate will care in a special way for the elderly and the infants/children who have been severely restricted during the pandemic as they are the most vulnerable. The pro-life programs and the culture of encounter will help in overcoming the challenges of individualism and in restoring the traditional family values and positive forces, such as love, respect, patience, generosity, hope, fidelity, forgiveness and spiritual strength in the face of adversity like the pandemic and changing realities.

#### **f. Importance and Dignity of Labour**

Due to the pandemic lockdown and shutdown, many people have lost their jobs which led to unemployment and thus to economic loss. Due to financial and labor crisis, the happiness, joy and peace were lost in the families. Hence, in the renewed mission of the Church, the family apostolate will organize programs to motivate the family members about the importance and dignity of labor, guiding them and supporting them to get involved in any sort of dignified labor and also to be creative in looking for different and sustainable sources of livelihood. Proper guidance is to be given through family apostolate for taking responsibility for the economic enhancement of the family and thus to promote prosperity and to restore true happiness in the family the Body of Christ.

### **g. Sharing and Caring**

The role of families in listening to 'the cry of the poor and the cry of mother earth' is also part of this renewed family apostolate. A culture of sharing and caring is to be developed through progressive education which will broaden, enlighten and inspire the mind and heart of everyone to assume the responsibility of serving not only one's family, but the greater family, the suffering poor families and our wounded common home. This spirit of sharing and caring, by its nature, is to be extended to the bigger family of humanity, regardless of people's faith, religion, ethnicity, social class, etc. Pastoral initiatives are to be offered to all, to promote the sense of being in one family. Formation for generosity and service especially to the children and youth is indispensable and it will help families to persevere, with fidelity and patience, to be a sign of mercy to families who lack peace and joy.

### **h. Some thoughts on new pastoral methods**

The Covid-19 pandemic challenged us to explore new ways to approach families and their members. The Church and her ministers need to think creatively how to gather and assist people by way of the internet and social media in various aspects (spiritual, liturgical, sacramental, pastoral, etc.) of their lives in the Church. The most challenging task is in the areas of liturgy and sacraments, for this would touch on the fundamental character of those areas in the tradition of the Church. But instead of thinking of an alternative substitution to the liturgical and sacramental celebrations via the internet, we could explore ways of assisting or preparing family members to appropriate the deeper meaning and effect of the liturgies and sacraments on their daily lives. Liturgy of the Word, Gospel sharing, communal prayers, etc. - even if online - would be possible forms to realize that end. There are also indications of positive experience of religious activities online. Participants have experienced a deepening of their faith, support and care from others, they felt that their contributions were valued, while others were able to establish more intimate

connection with community members. The digital divide however has led to the falling out of members, especially the poor, who have no access or capability to participate. The church is challenged to discern how it can combine the best of both online and offline worship post pandemic in a Church that is “hybrid”<sup>26</sup>

Counseling online is another challenging task, for this entails the lack of the fundamental element of counseling, i.e. face to face presence and encounter. But better something than nothing, the practicum of counseling in this form could possibly lead us gradually to improving its effectiveness, both on the digital, technical and the professional counseling levels, in personal interaction. Formation online is not more challenging, but it requires much effort in building programs suitable to the new technologies and at the same time exert and create the same impact in communicating the contents, facilitating the faith experience as well as in accompanying the family members in the formation process.

In any case, actually doing and experimenting in new forms and approaches would be the first step to start. Practicum opens us to better imagination and leads to improvement -that may be the motto we need follow at this liminal stage of new pastoral pathways.

## **2. Family as the Body of Christ: Catalysts for Creative Love**

In the new paradigm of the family pastoral apostolate the spiritual life of the family is to be deepened. Families are to be helped to see the reality with the eyes of profound faith, and to see in every situation the powerful presence and loving mercy of God. For the complete healing and revival of the wounded family, the Body of Christ, the renewed mission of the Church would assist

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<sup>26</sup> Agnes M. Brazal and Teresa Camarines. “Reception and Impact of Cyberchurches on Women in a time of Pandemic: An Exploratory Study.” Paper presented at the 10th Biennial Conference of the Ecclesia of Women in Asia, February 25, 2022; A.S. Gauxachs, JMA Aiguabella, and MD Bosch, “Coronavirus-Driven Digitalization of In-Person Communities. Analysis of the Catholic Church Online Response in Spain during the Pandemic. Religions 12(2021), 311)

the families to safeguard the beauty, the wonder and the importance of marriage and family life, to strengthen the spiritual union with God by joining in prayer, reading, reflecting and living the word of God, sharing in the Eucharistic communion and love. In and through this mystical union, communion and connection with God, the families will be able to experience interiorly the tremendous grace, mercy, love and power of God which will enable them to be channels and missionaries of God's Grace and mercy to other families and to the whole world.

The pandemic has helped us deepen our understanding of the dynamics between our human body and soul through faith. The family, the body of Christ in the home "*domus ecclesiae*", becomes the locus of expression and experience of the unity of the human person's body and soul.

Moreover, the lesson that the Covid19 pandemic teaches us is that, as the Body of Christ cannot be perceived without His Spirit: the domestic Body of Christ is also characterized by its spiritual and not only by its corporeal aspects. Even without the pandemic, our sickness of the soul or our egoistic spirit could have already been a threat to family life; and when being struck heavily by the pandemic in its external structures, family still survives or even thrives if our spirit is strong enough to rise above afflictions. This is all the more true if we let the Spirit of Christ come, permeate and reign over our family life. That Spirit is not purely "spiritual" in the sense of having nothing to do with external forms of family life and only with our "mental states"; the Spirit of Christ seeks always to express itself in the concrete, tangible forms of existence that constitute the Mystical Body of Christ.

Awareness of the family's spiritual character helps us to have a more dynamic conception of family life. Surely, such essential biological and legal elements as marriage, service of life, communal structures, etc. remain indispensable; but what gives life to those corporeal elements is the Spirit of love that regards every family member as beloved person (cf. *Familiaris Consortio* 18). Love is creative; it makes use of but also transcends all tangible

conditions. Restrictions caused by the pandemic may serve as catalysts for creative love to spark in family life.

Covid-19 Pandemic is surely a sign of the times, an urgent invitation from God, can we choose not to see nor hear this call, or with eyes and ears wide open, willing to go beyond our comfort zones and devote ourselves to serve in the way that is suitable for each one?

If our answer is YES, then we are heading toward the direction of grace, following the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Then we may start from our own family, the domestic church, making ourselves as a “living part” of the Body of Christ. Should sin appears and pains are inevitable, we might be strengthened by the Holy Spirit and recite with St. Paul: “Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.” (Col. 1:24).

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159. Responses to Doubts, Questions and Criticisms with regard to Chapter Eight of *Amoris Laetitia*, Fr. Vimal Tirimanna, CSsR, Pontifical Alphonsian Academy, Rome, June 2019
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166. Responses to the Guide Document for the FABC 50 General Conference, 29 November 2020, *Theme: FABC 50: Journeying together as peoples of Asia "...and they went a different way."* (Mt 2:12), submitted by the Episcopal Conferences / Countries of the FABC, Central, East and South Asia, August 2021
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