

*The Body of Christ in the Pandemic:
Theological Reflections from Asian Perspectives¹*

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B. In the Local Churches

I. Church as the Mystical Body of Christ

The crisis of the coronavirus pandemic challenges us to deepen our experience of God, foster communion among us, and expand the horizon of our ministries. It is a wake-up call for the Church in Asia to rethink or reconsider what it means to be a body of Christ in these trying times. The crisis moment leads us to the “liminal space” or the opportune moment to create something new and different, something more life-giving. People are searching for new ways of being God’s people in the church and society. The church as the community of the disciples of Jesus wants to announce the good news of God’s reign. The church as the body of Christ, the temple of God, the dwelling place of God, wants to become a visible presence of God’s healing presence in today’s suffering world.

In our search for new ways, we return to our roots, to the biblical metaphors such as the Body of Christ. The image of the Church as the body of Christ symbolizes a living organic unity, composed of a variety of members having Christ as its head (1 Cor 12:27; Eph 4:15). The church becomes authentic and credible when its members are closely related to Christ the head and to one another as members of the same body (Eph 4:16; Col 2:19). The

Pauline vision of the Church emphasizes that each member is unique and necessary to other members for the welfare of the body as a whole – “for building up the body of Christ” (Eph 4:12) or “for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). The church has a significant role in the purpose of God’s creation as each member is expected to make his or her unique contribution to the upbuilding of the entire creation.

The church as the body of Christ is enriched by the Spirit with a variety of charisms and services (1 Cor 12). The disciples of Jesus are constantly transformed by the Spirit, who keep alive the mind and memory of Jesus in today’s world. Church’s mission is an extension of the mission of Jesus; it is to bear witness to the whole person of Jesus, his words, deeds, his option for the sick, poor and downtrodden, his suffering, death, and resurrection, and to announce thereby the presence of God’s reign in the specific situation in which she finds herself today. The church is called to be the community of new life, of the new humanity transformed by the Spirit, signalling the presence of God’s reign.

The mission of the Church, as the body of Christ, flows out of being with Jesus and is shaped by Jesus’ ministry, suffering, and sacrificial death for humanity (Mk 10:45; 14:22-24). So, there is no mission without suffering, sacrifice, and self-giving service. The church has the cross of Christ as its foundation. What Jesus said about the grain of wheat is true not only of himself but of his Church as the body of Christ. The church has to fall and die in order to release the forces of divine life that dwell within her and blossom into a rich harvest (John 12:24-25; Mk 8:34-35). In other words, the church has to daily die and rise with Christ in order to bring the newness of life.

The metaphor of the Church as the body of Christ is three-dimensional in its identity and mission as it looks upward, inward, and outward. The upward dimension refers to the relationship with Christ the head, our personal encounter with Christ and our liturgical celebrations. The inward dimension refers to the relationship to one another as members of the same

body that includes synodal ways, fostering unity and a sense of community as the disciples of Jesus, our witness within the church. The outward dimension refers to the relationship of the Church to the world and the Church's mission in the world. In what follows we focus on these three aspects – liturgy, synodality and mission – of our identity as the Body of Christ.

II. Pandemic Challenges: Suffering in the Body of Christ

1. Liturgy: Sharing in the Cross of Christ

The pandemic made the need to reinterpret the meaning and practice of the sacraments in general and our Eucharistic celebrations in particular.

The celebration of the Liturgy has usually been one of the most common ways in Asia to express the visibility of the Church. Being mostly a small minority, except in the Philippines and East Timor, the members of the Church feel the need to gather to express their faith and to feel the support of the community. It is often considered to be the necessary way for building relationships among the various parts of the Mystical Body of Christ, so as to become more aware of the sense of belonging to Christ and to each other. Perhaps this is also one of the reasons why the structure of the Church and the importance of her visibility are often stressed in Asia. Especially the celebration of the Eucharist, the sacrament of the unity of the Church with Christ and among her members, has a vital importance for the life of the Church in Asia, not only theologically, but also in her practice.

Liturgies in most Asian countries are very much prepared, solemn and with an effort to connect them to the life and culture of the people. In a formal way, they express perfectly the respect for the sacred proper to the Asian soul. Even people who belong to other religious traditions that happen to join in them often feel the beauty and fascination of the sacred that emanates from these celebrations. Although it is true that the sacred can be met and experienced in many liturgical celebrations, to the Catholic faith the celebration of the Eucharist is the highest point of the Liturgy:

Christ makes himself present in His Word that is proclaimed, in His real Body and Blood under the species of the bread and wine and finally in the gathering of the community in His name.

However, the pandemic has practically dismantled all these. Liturgical celebrations and many other kinds of gatherings in the churches are often not allowed by the governments for health reasons. The parishes are closed and often the only way to join the liturgy of the Church is online, which excluded those without internet access or technological ability to participate. No processions, novenas, parish feasts and other common celebrations of the faith were allowed. Some sacraments, for example the Sacrament of Penance or the reception of the Eucharist during the celebration of the Mass, are practically impossible. It is also very difficult to receive the anointing of the sick, to accompany the dying and to live a proper grieving, because often all this were not allowed too. In a moment of great distress caused by the impact of the pandemic in the life of the faithful, the greatest expression of intimacy with the Lord, the reception of Holy Communion, was missing. Many faithful feel that receiving the Eucharist by desire is not the same as sharing in the Eucharistic bread. They miss the consolation of sharing in Christ's Body and the certitude that they are not alone in their trials. They cannot get the spiritual support that comes from the physical gathering of the Church community. Instead of the closeness of the community, the social distancing required by the Covid-19 virus isolates people from each other, making many feel loneliness, disconnection and isolation. When in a family only one member is a Christian, these feelings are even stronger. Some feel even abandoned by the Lord and the Church in a time when they would need some spiritual support the most.

Certainly, we must acknowledge that all this is a new painful experience for the Church, causing a lot of stress and suffering to her members. Though there are valid reasons for keeping the above-mentioned rules and so people are forced to follow them, it is important for the faithful to go beyond the

surface of the events to discover their deeper meaning and challenge for the growth of the Church, considered both as the individual members and as a community. We must be aware of the tension between individual right and public interest and help the people face and overcome it. In this way, it will not be just a passive suffering, accepted because unavoidable, but it will become a challenge for a deeper Christian life, for discovering new ways to live the faith of the Church.

The most evident suffering for the Christian community at this time is the inability to participate in the physical gathering for the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist. In most cases it has shifted to a virtual or online celebration where it is impossible to receive the Holy Communion, to which the whole celebration is oriented. But what is the theological meaning of the celebration of the Eucharist? It is a sharing in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, an actualization of Christ's sacrifice on the cross so that sharing in his suffering and death we can also have a share in the fruits of his resurrection.

In the encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, St. John Paul II wrote: "In giving his sacrifice to the Church, Christ has also made his own the spiritual sacrifice of the Church, which is called to offer herself in union with the sacrifice of Christ. This is the teaching of the Second Vatican Council concerning all the faithful: 'Taking part in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, which is the source and summit of the whole Christian life, they offer the divine victim to God, and offer themselves along with it' (LG11)." (EE13)

The Pope continues: "The Eucharistic Sacrifice makes present not only the mystery of the Saviour's passion and death, but also the mystery of the resurrection which crowned his sacrifice. It is as the living and risen One that Christ can become in the Eucharist the 'bread of life' (Jn 6:35, 48), the 'living bread' (Jn. 6:51)." (EE 14)

The situation that the whole world is facing because of the pandemic is certainly part of the human suffering that Christ has

taken on himself on the cross. If the faithful can consciously recognize the face of the Crucified Christ in all the physical, psychological, economic, social and spiritual suffering caused by the pandemic and if together with Christ they can present it as a sacrifice offered to the God, they can for sure fully participate in a different way, but equally meaningful, to the celebration of the Eucharist. Probably the ritual part can be joined only online, like a virtual reality, but the deep spiritual meaning can be lived out in the daily actions of every Christian believer. If the aim of the celebration is the receiving of the Communion as a sharing in Christ's death and resurrection, during this time of pandemic the faithful can share in Christ's death welcoming all the form of suffering they experience in their life and in the life of the world with the same faith and trust in which they receive the Eucharist. It becomes their perfect sacrifice offered to the God together with Christ for the salvation of the world. If the real participation to the celebration of the Eucharist risks sometimes to become for many faithful only an empty ritual to which one has become accustomed and therefore incapable of changing their life according to the measure of Christ, this new spiritual way to share in the Eucharist challenges the faith of the believer to a deeper and life-changing experience. In spite of his human fear, Jesus walked resolutely towards Jerusalem (Lk 9:51), where he was going to face his passion and death. In the same way in spite of all human fears Jesus' disciples today can face all sufferings with full trust in a Father who is *love* and will not abandon them to the power of death even though they have to pass through it with Christ. In a time when isolation is required, the suffering Christ becomes the companion of every member of the suffering Body of Christ, the one that having experienced the great pain of being abandoned on the cross can understand the pain of his brothers and sisters. He, who has experienced suffering, separation and death, becomes now their real strength and support in time of trials.

However, let us also remember that actually death is not the end of the Paschal Mystery and that in the Eucharist we share in the Risen Christ too. A full participation in the Eucharist

requires the communion because it joins us with the Risen Lord that making himself present in all who receive communion and builds up the unity of the Church in Him. The encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* states: “The Eucharistic Sacrifice is intrinsically directed to the inward union of the faithful with Christ through communion; we receive the very One who offered himself for us, we receive his body which he gave up for us on the Cross and his blood which he “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:28)” (EE 16). Therefore, becoming one with the living Christ, every faithful participating at the Eucharistic banquet is called to be a witness of the resurrection, which is victory over suffering and death, the most evident effects of sin. Though at this time of pandemic it is not possible to celebrate the victory over sin through the participation in the Eucharistic rite, every faithful and every Christian community are called to witness to this victory through their daily life. It is a witness of hope and joy, because the Risen Christ reminds us that the final victory belongs to Christ, that life has won over death and that nothing can separate us from God’s love. All will pass, even the pandemic, but God will stay forever. Our hope is not rooted in a pious desire, but in an event that has already happened and that will be fulfilled at the end of time. The eschatological dimension of the Christian faith, which is celebrated in the liturgy of the Church, becomes the energy that is capable of supporting and moving forward the life of all those who are still living their life in the limitations of history. We can be sure that the final victory belongs to the Risen Lord.

Again, John Paul II states: “A significant consequence of the eschatological tension inherent in the Eucharist is also the fact that it spurs us on our journey through history and plants a seed of living hope in our daily commitment to the work before us. (...) Christians will feel more obliged than ever not to neglect their duties as citizens in this world. Theirs is the task of contributing with the light of the Gospel to the building of a more human world, a world fully in harmony with God's plan. (...) Proclaiming the death of the Lord ‘until he comes’ (1 Cor 11:26) entails that all who take part in the Eucharist be committed to changing their

lives and making them in a certain way completely 'Eucharistic'." (EE 20)

If the faithful can live this witness even among the happenings of the pandemic, they will show that their faith, celebrated in the liturgical signs, has brought its fruits even beyond and besides the rite: It has transformed their life in the image of Christ, they are becoming "living bread" for their brothers and sisters.

More could be said about the other sacraments and liturgies, about the sacramental and devotions, but because of space limitations this paper will not be able to consider them. It is enough to say though that the Body of Christ, the believing community, also felt the deeper pain of not being able to experience the other liturgies and sacraments more fully, especially the most needed - the Sacrament of the Sick and the Dying - in the face of millions of sickness and death. Moreover, some marriages, baptisms and ordination to the priesthood happened in a very limited way - with only the priests and a limited number from the families to celebrate. Online ways to connect with loved ones in these most important moments are sorely lacking in spirit and meaning. Church ministers too, especially the priests and liturgy teams in the dioceses or parishes, felt ill-equipped to find new and appropriate ways to help people and communities pray and experience God in a much-needed time.

2. Synodality: Walking in Untrodden Paths

The Pope's call to become a Synodal Church can be expressed in many ways. The pandemic challenged the unique role of the priests to encourage the participation of all faithful in our responses to this crisis situation.

The Church's ministry in a parish in Asia consists of many decision-making processes contributed by many volunteer staffs of the faithful in the Parish Council and various committees and commissions. It is like a beautiful textile of God's love which

integrates all the faithful. Pope Saint John Paul II illustrates this beautiful reality in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation “Ecclesia in Asia”: “In every diocese, the parish remains the ordinary place where the faithful gather to grow in faith, to live the mystery of ecclesial communion and to take part in the Church's mission. Therefore, the Synod Fathers urged Pastors to devise new and effective ways of shepherding the faithful, so that everyone, especially the poor, will feel truly a part of the parish and of God's People as a whole. Pastoral planning with the lay faithful should be a normal feature of all parishes” (EA 25c).

However, curfews were imposed in many countries during the pandemic and church ministries were subjected to restriction to prevent the infection and further spread of the virus. Many parishes were not only unable to carry out the pastoral programs they have planned, but they were also unable to meet face-to-face to discuss how to respond to the pandemic. As a result, many parishes held online meetings to discuss what kind of pastoral program was possible and to make concrete plans. As we faced a new reality that we had never experienced before, it became important to plan a pastoral program with the guidance of medical professionals and other experts in the pandemic. In the midst of this experience, more lay and religious people than ever before became involved in the process of developing the church's pastoral programs.

Each parish had her own method for decision-making processes with a collaboration between priests, the religious and lay people in ordinary times. It was a part of the daily routine of church ministry: many regular meetings, such as weekly, monthly, annually have been held by parish councils, committees and commissions. Pandemic interferes in this cycle and causes new challenges. We are facing very unknown and uncomfortable situation in the society so that many pastors or many volunteer staffs of the parish have many hardships and struggles. Pope Francis pointed out one form to respond to such kind of challenges in Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*: “Complacency is

seductive; it tells us that there is no point in trying to change things, that there is nothing we can do, because this is the way things have always been and yet we always manage to survive. By force of habit, we no longer stand up to evil. We “let things be”, or as others have decided they ought to be” (GE 137). He teaches us how to overcome this attitude in GE: “Yet let us allow the Lord to rouse us from our torpor, to free us from our inertia. Let us rethink our usual way of doing things; let us open our eyes and ears, and above all our hearts, so as not to be complacent about things as they are but unsettled by the living and effective word of the risen Lord” (GE 137). As for how to face the new realities in the midst of the pandemic experienced by the Church in Asia, as Pope Francis pointed out, they were indeed responders to the call of the Risen Lord in creating and implementing pastoral programs while focusing on those who needed a helping hand.

As Paul has emphasized in Corinthians (1 Cor.12), we are all one body, with many parts, each one gifted for building up the Body of Christ. The Spirit challenges all the members of the parishes and local faith communities to contributing their part by using the charisms they have been gifted with. In responding to this unprecedented crisis, they could also discover gifts, skills and charisms parishioners did not think they have.

Pope Francis insists on the importance of focusing on the common life of ordinary people in GE: “The common life, whether in the family, the parish, the religious community or any other, is made up of small everyday things. This was true of the holy community formed by Jesus, Mary and Joseph, which reflected in an exemplary way the beauty of the Trinitarian communion. It was also true of the life that Jesus shared with his disciples and with ordinary people” (GE 143). We are all invited to see and listen to the reality in the society now, especially to those who are suffering most in this situation – the poorest, those who have no or limited access to medicines and medical care, have lost their means of income, cannot participate in online education, marginalized women, our indigenous peoples, among others.

How do we practice listening and participation (synodality) in such a situation? Although some parishes in most countries managed to respond through financial help and online planning meetings, many are caught unaware and not knowing how to respond pastorally.

In the same Bible text (Cor 12), Paul also reminds all to give special attention to the parts of the body that seem to be weak or considered dispensable. Paul reminds that these are the parts that God gives greater dignity to. In these pandemic times, and in the spirit of synodality, who are the members or sectors in the church we have not listened or given a voice to? Listening to them does not simply mean attending to their cries, but allowing them to participate in church life and mission through their own giftedness, even in the midst of their cries and pains. As Paul has said the whole body of Christ suffers when a part suffers.

3. Mission: Being Credible in Proclamation

The pandemic invites us to reclaim the role of the laity in the life and mission of the church and strengthen our dialogue with the poor, with cultural diversity, and multiple religious traditions- our way of mission and evangelization in Asia.

The Church is the community of the disciples of Jesus Christ, which is nurtured by His spirit of life. The life of Jesus the Christ shapes and nurtures our life as communion in this world and stimulates us to pass on this joy of life to the others: this is our mission. We as Church are sent to go into the world to announce the good news of God's reigning presence, to proclaim God's will that we should turn our hearts to Him. We are sent to tell the others about the life which God accompanies and blesses.

Pope Francis has emphasized in *Evangelii Gaudium* that mission defines the church; that we are mission (EG Ch.3). But this mission is not credible without the witness. The mission is not the witness, but without it, a mission faces not only a failure, but would also be meaningless and powerless. In other words, a credible mission finds essential support in the witness, which is

the life shaped and moulded by God's will and love. "The most effective means of evangelization and service in the name of Christ has always been and continues to be the witness of life. The embodiment of our faith in sharing and compassion (sacrament) supports the credibility of our obedience to the Word (proclamation). This witnessing has to become the way of the Gospel for persons, institutions and the whole Church community". (FABC No.93, Part III, C).

In this pandemic time the witness of the love of God is needed more than ever. Not only are we as the Church, but also the people outside our communion are suffering economically, psychologically, and physically. The love of God may be questioned because of this long-term suffering. Many people suffer not only because of instability in economy, but also because they lose their security in life. We can say that this is a "new pandemic" - anxiety: anxiety for life in the near future. In the midst of the anxiety all are experiencing, how can we think about the others as brothers and sisters in this suffering? How can we have the sense of community in this frustrated situation? This corona pandemic challenges our call to be community, but at the same time, it also pushes us to new solidarity. Indeed, we have witnessed and we ourselves have engaged in, so many acts of solidarity from our small neighborhoods to the bigger towns and society: community pantries, fund-raising, visiting houses to give food, online prayer, providing transportation, giving medicines, listening to others, physically or online. Barriers of religion, culture, caste or economic strata fell away as acts of compassion overflowed. It was also upbuilding to network with others - NGOs, people's movement, local government units. The pandemic made us understand more clearly that mission includes partnering with others working for the common good. We have a *missio cum gentibus* and a *missio inter gentes* along with *missio ad gentes*.

Our being the Body of Christ is most clearly manifested in our sense of mission. What Jesus proclaimed in the Bible as he

breaks the bread (1 Cor 11; 24), the central words and meaning of the Eucharist: "This is my body which is for you... do this in memory of me" takes on a very deep meaning in this time of suffering. In this pandemic, part of our mission is experiencing the brokenness of the Body of Christ - as we also experience its suffering through illness and loss of economic opportunities, through loneliness and anxiety - but especially also through helping others bear the physical, emotional and social pain they are experiencing through different acts of solidarity. According to Saint Paul, the preaching of the Gospel involves continuing God's work of reconciliation, demolishing social and ethnic barriers and forming new communities in Christ that include all peoples (Eph 2:13-22).

III. The Church of the Risen Lord as a Healing Presence

1. Liturgy: Witnessing to Christ's Resurrection

Though the Church in her human dimension is certainly in need of healing, the action of the Risen Lord through his Spirit transforms her in a healing presence in the world. Actually, we have many signs indicating that the Risen Lord is already working among the faithful, making His Church a healing presence beyond Her own wounds. Many have become source of hope and consolation for others. People have learned to share with each other more than in the past. The wealthier, but even the poor, are moving out of their comfort zones and own needs to help those most affected by the economic crisis connected with the pandemic. People prepare food and essential goods to distribute to those who have nothing left or to those in quarantine because sick with the virus or in self-isolation because they have been in touch with sick people. Those who have not much material wealth to share still find time to help, to prepare and distribute food and goods. Even religious congregations and religious organizations have learned to join their forces for a more effective service to the neediest. Neighbours take care of their neighbours regardless of their faith and religion, sometimes even with just a simple conversation loudly spoken from one house to the other. Indifference, fear and

isolation are overcome through phone calls and online conversations. Prayer time is organized online for common needs and special occasions. Catholic families gather together for joining common liturgical celebrations online. Sometimes even prayer for the dead is organized online, to offer opportunities for consolation and support in a time of grieving that otherwise would be very lonely. Since these are online, the prayers - through texts, pictures, video, music, poetry - spread to a wider community than before the pandemic. A new web of interconnectedness and relationships is born from the internet. Though it might seem just a virtual reality, in many ways it breaches into the concrete world through the sharing of concrete needs among real people sharing their concrete life. Relationships forged in cyber communities are strengthened in the concrete sharing and response to needs, and vice-versa. The creative online services demonstrate that we have explored new ways of celebrating the Eucharist. A new form of Christian community is born. Perhaps the biggest challenge for the pastors is as to how to follow this new life that is born; it is an invitation to be daring enough to walk on untrodden paths.

Finally, it seems that the liturgical crisis caused by the pandemic can become a great opportunity for a deepening and a renewal of the liturgy itself. The Christian community and each faithful is called to rediscover the deepest meaning of the rites celebrated and to let the Spirit to transform their lives according to Christ. The Holy Spirit at work in the Liturgy of the Church, the one transforming the bread and wine in Body and Blood of Christ, is the same received by every Christian in Baptism and it is at work in them to "christify" them, that is, to make them like Christ. It is now their task to let the Spirit that animates the liturgy to act fully in their life so that the Church can show the face of Christ to all humankind till the time when the Lord will come again in his glory at the end of time.

Obviously, all this does not mean that the participation to the ritual celebration of the Eucharist is not important and it could be replaced by a Eucharistic life. Both dimensions, when possible,

should always be kept together to support and complement each other.

2. Synodality: Widening the Circle of 'Community'

It was indeed a golden opportunity to look for new ways of being closer to one another as members of the body of Christ, especially the poorer members of our communities who were most affected by this crisis. Some parishes set up counseling sessions and meetings especially for those mentally affected by this crisis, most of them young people.

There is a very clear pastoral attitude of the Church which is proposed by Pope Francis, when he addressed his message at the ceremony commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops on October 17, 2015: "A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening "is more than simply hearing". It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of truth" (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he 'says to the Churches' (Rev 2:7)". His teaching points out the importance of mutuality between the priests, the religious and lay people, and this leads us to rediscover the nature of the Church as Synodal Church. He continued in the same address: "Synodality, as a constitutive element of the Church, offers us the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself. If we understand, as Saint John Chrysostom says, that "Church and Synod are synonymous", since the Church is nothing other than the "journeying together" of God's flock along the paths of history towards the encounter with Christ the Lord, then we understand too that, within the Church, no one can be "raised up" higher than others. On the contrary, in the Church, it is necessary that each person "lower" himself or herself, so as to serve our brothers and sisters along the way".

The International Theological Commission published "Synodality in the life of and mission of the Church" clarified that: "First and foremost, synodality denotes the particular style that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel. Synodality ought to be expressed in the Church's ordinary way of living and working. This *modus vivendi et operandi* works through the community listening to the Word and celebrating the Eucharist, the brotherhood of communion, co-responsibility and participation of the whole People of God in its life and mission, on all levels and distinguishing between various ministries and roles" (70a).

"In a more specific sense, which is determined from a theological and canonical point of view, synodality denotes those structures and ecclesial processes in which the synodal nature of the Church is expressed at an institutional level, but analogously on various levels: local, regional and universal. These structures and processes are officially at the service of the Church, which must discover the way to move forward by listening to the Holy Spirit" (70b).

"Listening to the Holy Spirit" means that priests, religious, and lay people share their gifts, visions, and thoughts while asking for God's guidance through prayer. Synodality as a constitutive element of the church is best seen and can be integrated in our decision-making processes in Church ministry. During the pandemic, it was interesting to see how young people have become more engaged as most of the active members of parish ministries are senior citizens and were limited in their movements. Moreover, young people are digital natives and their services were much needed in the immediate setting up of social communication ministries in the parishes. In this regard, what Pope Francis said in *Christus Vivit* are very useful not only for youth pastoral care, but also for planning pastoral programs for the whole Church: "Youth ministry has to be synodal; it should involve a "journeying

together” that values “the charisms that the Spirit bestows in accordance with the vocation and role of each of the Church’s members, through a process of co-responsibility... Motivated by this spirit, we can move towards a participatory and co-responsible Church, one capable of appreciating its own rich variety, gratefully accepting the contributions of the lay faithful, consecrated persons, as well as groups, associations and movements. No one should be excluded or exclude themselves” (CV 206).

This attitude of listening should include more openness to those that are less involved in the life of the Church and that pastoral care reaches less, like for example those who for various reasons do not practice their faith and those who are on the margins of the Church life (the poor, the LGBTQ+ communities, the immigrants, among others). Christians of other denominations and even faithful of other faiths could also be included in this synodal process, contributing their wisdom and experience in our continuing dialogue of life and social action. In some Asian countries where the Church is more numerous, it has also been possible to journey together in the public and social sphere, cooperating in programs and projects of local governments, non-governmental organizations and other people’s movements.

It is important to note that Pope Francis refers to "co-responsibility". When we can accept each other's differences as diversity, respect each other's charism, and make the best of each other's good points, the Church will be richly rewarded. He also pointed out the importance of mutual learning process: “In this way, by learning from one another, we can better reflect that wonderful multifaceted reality that Christ’s Church is meant to be. She will be able to attract young people, for her unity is not monolithic, but rather a network of varied gifts that the Spirit ceaselessly pours out upon her, renewing her and lifting her up from her poverty” (CV 207).

Amidst the pandemic, the church community was able to find many wonderful charisms that were previously unseen. The

ministries and services of the church will be enriched if we learn from each other while cherishing synodality in the future steps of the Church.

3. Mission: Sharing the Love of God

This crisis has brought out the best of humanity. The generosity of the people, in general, to reach out to the needy is undeniable. The stories of kindness in many different countries transcending the boundaries of religion and race are a powerful witness to the Gospel values, a credible witness to the values of the Kingdom. Humanity truly became a family of God.

If we believe on the one and same Father who creates our same earth, who wants to be the Father of all human nations, we should turn our heart to them as brothers and sisters. Their joy and sadness should be ours: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ." (GS 1). However, in societies with pluralistic religious belongings, a solidarity and an empathy could be seen or we can be accused as proselytizing. Because of it, our solidarity and empathy should be a sincere act of love. We cannot be pushed to choose either mission or ethical responsibility in society. Our ethical responsibility is our witness, and this witness is our mission, namely to show the love of God that spreads through our life.

Pope Francis reminds us about our essence as missionary in *Evangelii Gaudium*. But this duty does not compete with the fraternity as he challenged us to grow a culture of encounter (cf. FT 216). Our multi-layered diversity in Asia is the beautiful space for encounter: "We are committed to the emergence of the Asianness of the Church in Asia. This means that the Church must be an embodiment of the Asian vision and values of life, especially interiority, harmony, a holistic and inclusive approach to every area of life. We are also convinced that only by the "inner authority" of authentic lives founded on a deep spirituality will we

become credible instruments of transformation. This is important, because our contacts with those of other religious traditions have to be at the level of depth, rather than just the level of ideas or action.” (FABC Paper no. 93, Part III).

The last but not the least, the agent of the mission is the Spirit of God. Let the Spirit fill us with boldness and courage to face the challenges. “We need the Spirit’s prompting, lest we be paralyzed by fear and excessive caution, lest we grow used to keeping within safe bounds. Let us remember that closed spaces grow musty and unhealthy. When the Apostles were tempted to let themselves be crippled by danger and threats, they joined in prayer to implore *parrhesía*: ‘And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness’ (Acts 4:29). As a result, ‘when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness’ (Acts 4:31).” (GE 133). Even if the pandemic has filled us with fear and uncertainties and has narrowed our worlds to limited movement, there are continuing socio-political issues in our countries that call on us to be prophetic communities with others working for the common good.

What we are called today in the Asian context is not so much to speak about Jesus as to let him live in our families, parish communities and let him speak through our life witness (cf. John 13:34-35). We are invited to announce and embody the good news of God’s love and God’s reign (Mk 1:14-20; Mt 4:17-20; Luke 4:16-21). We are called to live as a foretaste of God’s coming reign in the midst of the pandemic crisis. Just as suffering was an integral part of Jesus’s mission in the world, so it is with the life and mission of his Church (cf. Mk 8:30-10:52). “If any want to become my followers,” Jesus invites, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

In the context of the current crisis of legitimacy, our verbal proclamation of the Gospel should partner with a holy life style that respects the sacredness of human lives as well as the entire

creation. Living a life worthy of the gospel was of great importance for St. Paul (cf. Phil 1:27). If we do so, Paul assures us that we will shine as lights in the world (Phi 2:15). In other words, our integrity and communion will enable us to become life-giving witness among our brothers and sisters of other religious traditions.

IV. Responding through New Pastoral Pathways

We begin by asking the following questions: What kind of community are we becoming in Asia as the body of Christ? How does the Church in Asia become a sacrament of God's love to the suffering people of our times, a credible witness to the values of the Kingdom? How can the Church in Asia become more authentic in its mission of evangelization? As the body of Christ, the Church embodies the Gospel values through its life-giving celebrations of the liturgy, its mutual respect and reciprocal relationship and communion, and its loving service and care for the poor or less privileged members of society.

1. Liturgy: From the Church to the World

To support a deeper spiritual life, even when it would be possible to join again the liturgy of the Church in person, it could be helpful to organize at the local level: (i) Short in-person or online formation time on the meaning of the liturgy, especially in pandemic times; (ii) Small in-person or online communities, where the members could share their experiences of living the Sunday Liturgy in their daily life during the whole week, supporting each other in the struggles of their Christian witness and rejoicing for each other's successes. They could also reflect together on how to put the liturgical message into practice so that to have a positive impact on their personal context and on their neighborhood. It would help the faithful becoming more aware of the importance of letting the Sunday ritual bear visible fruits during the entire week. These small communities could be entrusted to the care of lay people who have been prepared for the task. Sometimes the priest could also join in as a member to keep

the connection with the parish center. The advantage of both these programs, if online, is that it would save time in travel in those places where distances, traffic and busy weekly schedules could be an obstacle. Finally, the liturgy teams in the parishes and dioceses could also look at the other sacraments and what insights could they get from their pandemic experience so that these liturgies too are renewed by the frontlines/signs of the times.

2. Synodality: From Event to Lifestyle

In “Synodality in the Mission of the Church”, the International Theological Commission (ITC) illustrates “the distinctive characteristics of the true Church” according to Cyprian of Carthage and explain it: “the episcopal and synodal principle that must rule its life and mission locally and at a universal level: while nothing should be done in the local Church without the Bishop - *nihil sine episcopo* - it is equally true that nothing should be done without your council (the Presbyters & Deacons) - *nihil sine consilio vestro* - or without the consensus of the people - *et sine consensu plebis*” (25b). This principle should be understood and implemented as “consensus-making process” among the clergy, the religious and the lay people. ITC explains this process: “The historical, linguistic and cultural links that mould interpersonal communication in the local Church and describe its particular features facilitate the adoption of a synodal style in its daily life and are the basis for effective missionary conversion. In the local Church, Christian witness is embodied in specific human and social situations, which allows for an incisive initiation of synodal structures which serve mission” (77b). In the midst of the pandemic, the Church in Asia learned the usefulness of communication through the internet, enabling her members to meet virtually and to share the insights more frequently than ever before. This way enables them to listen to each other more deeply and to build up consensus more effectively. We are also challenged to think of new ministries (trauma counselling, urban gardening, wholistic health, ecological, etc.) including leadership

structures that are synodal (more representative of all sectors, inter-ministerial) so as to be more mission-oriented.

As the members of the people of God, "all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ" (LG, 32). In the synodal way, the participation of all people of God in the decision-making process is essential. The synodal process starts by listening to the people, who "even participate in the prophetic office of Christ", according to a principle dear to the Church of the first millennium: "*Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debet*" [what concerns all needs to be debated by all]. [[Pope Francis' Speech during the 50 years of the Synod of Bishops in 2015]]. The path of synodality therefore consists in (i) listening to one another as people of God and listening together to the Holy Spirit which implies the virtue of mutual trust, (ii) discerning together what God says and wants from the Church which implies being open-minded and daring, (iii) and participating in the mission of God with co-responsibility at all levels of ecclesial life. We need to thus ask ourselves: what do mutual trust and co-responsibility look like in the Synodal Church we are trying to bring into being in the midst of the pandemic crisis or a post-pandemic church?

3. Mission: From Preaching to Prophetic Living and Witnessing

In response to the challenges we face in this pandemic time, let us think about the wholistic healing that we can do in the Spirit of God. That is our witness and at the same time our mission to proclaim the love of God. But we need a space to deepen this spirituality and the values we expect in our Asian and pluralistic societies. This sacred space can be included in our pastoral programs: (i) We need to urge character-building in schools and our communities to bring about the spirit of inclusiveness. We learn to live together in the mystic of community. (ii) We need systematic programs of charity for the empowerment of the people whom we serve. This is our contribution to the societies in

which we live. We can also speak about our contribution to public life – political, economic, social efforts that pursue the common good, perhaps by networking or collaborating if possible with governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, and other peoples’ movements for justice, peace and environmental action. (iii) We need to bring about the sense of the mystery or sacredness into our daily life. This sense of sacredness gives us the foundation of faith to live in harmony with all the people inside and outside our community.

The Church as the Body of Christ: An Inclusive and Compassionate Presence

We can explore new pathways in harmony with our Asian spiritual traditions as well as in response to our Asian social realities. The pandemic served as an opportunity to slow down a bit and reclaim our spiritual space, to have a careful look at what is happening inside of us. A spiritual life that deepens our relationship with the Almighty but merciful God so that this life would be the basis for all our personal acts, as well as in the public sphere. The pandemic experience has also challenged us towards a spiritual renewal that leads the Church to become more inclusive and more compassionate.

Jesus consistently went in search of those excluded by others, like sinners (Mt 9:13), the poor (Lk 4:18; 14:13) and the lost (Lk 19:10). Jesus dared to transcend the boundaries which alienated humans from one another. As the Samaritan story in John’s Gospel (4:4-42) and the story of Syrophenician woman from the synoptic tradition (Matthew 15 and Mark 7) demonstrate Jesus’ announcement of God’s reign included breaking down divisive walls which are spiritual, sociological, and religious. In his message for the 107th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Pope Francis offers a clear vision for our common journey and urges us to create “an ever more inclusive world” (27th September 2021). This spirit of inclusiveness leads us to go beyond borders, and this can be facilitated by the internet. We are invited to

cultivate the spirit of harmony that brings us to live together even in pluralistic way; as a mosaic that builds a beautiful image.

Mission involves loving one's enemies, being compassionate even to those who turn against, being merciful as God is merciful (Luke 6:32-36). Jesus envisaged a new covenant community in which humans truly care for one another as friends and disciples of Jesus (John 15). The Pope visualizes 'a poor church' and a 'church for the poor'. Pope's thinking of the church as a 'field hospital full of mercy and forgiveness' will radically alter our way of thinking about the Church in Asia (the General Audience on 28th August 2019). When we can connect with the indwelling presence of God, where the "Spirit bears common witness with our spirit" (Romans 8:16), it can and will change our lives! As we abide in God's compassionate gaze in contemplation, all negative energy and hopelessness will eventually fall away as counter-productive and useless, we become more compassionate in our attitudes and actions. This inclusive and compassionate gaze is always the fruit of contemplation and God's grace and must be reflected in our responses to the challenges of our daily life. The Church as the body of Christ then embodies the self-giving and self-sacrificing love of Jesus in our personal, communal and public life in our respective societies.

C. In Creation

When the pandemic happened, we literally saw the world stopping briefly and some say perhaps the earth breathing more deeply. But it was only a brief respite to the continuous destruction of our common home and highlighted even more clearly how fragile and deep is the connection between humanity and the earth. As participants in the recent Conference of the Parties - COP26- or more popularly known as Climate Change Conference said, this is a make-or-break moment to determine the future of the planet, our common home. Hopefully our experiences in this liminal time provide new narratives that will strengthen new perspectives, convictions and approaches to more sustainable lifeways. As M. Candotti, director of the UN

Development Program said “A tiny virus brought humanity to its knees, humiliated it by threatening its prospects for progress and undermining the already delicate balance between humans and the environment.”

As the whole world is looking for remedies to the social, medical and spiritual problems brought about by the current pandemic, the Church (especially through the recent encyclicals of Pope Francis) offers everyone the transforming power of the Gospel - the power to lead hearts and minds away from a materialistic view of human life and of the earth. The “ecological conversion” that Pope Francis talks about in is the first step towards that longed-for harmony both in the lives of people and in their relationship with the earth: “a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach ... so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (Cf. LS 48-49).

I Creation as The Cosmic Body Of Christ

“For in the resurrection of the Lord, God has shown that he has adopted the earth forever”.² These words of Karl Rahner are a reminder to our technologically-ruled world about the divine roots of the dignity of the earth: through the Word of God, the material and the spiritual worlds came to be, and through the same Word (made flesh) not only was humanity redeemed but the earth as well. God’s presence in creation is so deep and so comprehensive that every part of it bears witness to God’s love. Let us explore the Body of Christ in the cosmos through our Christian and Asian traditions.

1. Building on the Christian Tradition

The creation stories in the Bible proclaim that God created every living thing out of love, each with a purpose and interdependent with one another. The creation of humans in the ‘image and likeness of God’ (Gen 1:26) is the foundation, process

² K. Rahner, “A Faith that Loves the Earth”, in *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life: Sermons, Essays and Prayers: Karl Rahner, SJ*, ed. Annemarie S. Kidder (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 58.

and culmination of human life. Creation and incarnation are two interrelated dimensions of God's communication to the world.

The biblical tradition is centered on Jesus, the living word. In the person of the incarnate Word the material world, including humanity, has been incorporated and a seed for the definitive transformation has been planted in the world. "For Christians, all the creatures of the material universe find their true meaning in the incarnate Word" (*Laudato Si* 235).

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being . . . He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of the father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1-14).

Our Sacramental Tradition espouses that the creation is a symbol and instrument of God's creative and saving action. LS says the universe as "a whole, in all its manifold relationships" highlights the inexhaustible richness of God (LS 86). Jesus Christ is the highest expression, the embodiment, of God's commitment to humanity and the cosmos and also the symbol of humanity and the cosmos saying 'yes' to God (the Word became flesh). Sacramental theologies emphasize the presence of God in us and in our world/cosmos.

The biblical account of creation suggests three fundamentally close and intertwined relationships - with God, with one's neighbour and with the earth (LS 66). The divine process of salvation passes through humans into the whole cosmos, as a cosmotheandric undertaking. Any rupture in this relationship is sin. In this cosmotheandric drama, humans are only adopted ones into the divine economy as stewards cum caretakers in the name of God and not at all owners or authorities. Humans were set in Paradise 'to till it and keep it' (Gen 2:15). Hence, any

misconception and the consequent mismanagement regarding the tripartite cosmotheandric process would lead into imbalances that would engender disobedience to God, human self-disintegration and cosmic disharmony that would multiply human misery (cf. LS 115-116; Gen. 3).

The life and writings of Church Fathers also contributed to our Christian tradition of creation as an integral part of the Body of Christ. For Irenaeus, the Word is present in the whole creation, as its handiwork. The Word reveals the Creator through the means of creation itself. This same Word was engaged with Abraham, Moses, and all the economies recounted in the Scriptures. All of this culminates in the Word made flesh, who “suffered for us and rose for our sakes, and will come again in glory to raise up all flesh.” In his death and resurrection, the incarnate Word recapitulates, saves and brings to fulfilment all things (cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, V, 18,3; 20,2; 12,4). For Bonaventure, the Word is the perfect expression of the Father who is the ‘Fountain of Fullness’ and, as such, the Word is simultaneously ‘exemplar’ of all creation³. As the full expression of God’s fecundity, the Word of God is also the expression of all that God can be in relation to finite creatures.

The OTC in 2013 published an ecological reflection (FABC Paper 146) which came out before *Laudato Si* and proposes an eco-theology that has four dimensions: Trinitarian (relationality; all reality can be seen in terms of relationships); Christological (Jesus Christ as the definitive offer of God’s love to the world and likewise the definitive acceptance on the part of creation); Anthropological (the human person - uniqueness and servant of creation); Cosmic (interconnection between humanity and the cosmos, sacramental - reveals the presence of God, and manifests

³ J. Bowmann, The Cosmic Exemplarism of Bonaventure in the Journal of Religion, Vol. 55, No. 2, Apr.1975, 181-198. See also Ilia Delio, OSF, “Bonaventure’s Metaphysics of God”, Theological Studies 60 (1999), cdn.theologicalstudies.net

God's covenant seen in the stories of Noah and the flood, Abraham and the promised land).

1. Remembering the Cosmic Christ

Reflections on the Cosmic Christ has become more relevant in these pandemic times, as more and more theologians and eco-theologies expound on this and source their insights especially from Jesuit French theologian and paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1995). He believed that the whole universe with Christ as source of energy, is the true fullness of Christianity. Teilhard developed the concept of evolutionary Christianity, theorizing that the whole of creation was progressing toward fulfillment in Christ. The risen Christ, the cosmic Christ in whom all things hold together (Col 1:17), can be identified with the Omega of evolution. In this way the cosmic and the Christic not only converge, but are one. For him, the goal of the universe, which he called the Omega Point, was full consciousness with God. He was also quoted by Pope Francis in LS 83 "The ultimate destiny of the universe is the fullness of God, which had already been attained by the risen Christ, the measure of the maturity of all things. Col 1: 12-14, 16, 19-20. Jn 1:1-18)".

Protestant theologian J. Moltmann expounds also on the Cosmic Christ, espousing that: 1. Christ is the ground of the creation of all things (original creation); 2. Christ as the moving power in the evolution of creation (continuous creation); 3. Christ is the redeemer of the whole process (new creation)⁴.

Our scriptures are also clear on the central role of Jesus and how intimately he is part of the cosmos - as source, pattern and direction - and therefore his body.

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or

⁴ J. Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope*, quoted in Houtz, W. "Jurgen Moltmann on Evolution as God's Continuous Creation", biologos.org, July 18, 2017.

rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col 1:15–20)

“With all wisdom and insight, he made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:9–10).

Catholic Spiritual writer, Fr. Rolheiser also locates Christ within the structure of cosmos itself as Ephesians proclaims. He believes that Christ is cosmic because all reality (spiritual, physical, moral, mathematical, mystical or hormonal) is made and shaped in his likeness and reveals the face of the invisible God. This means we must search for God not just in the Church, or in the Christian Scriptures but in all realities. For him, Christ is “not just an anthropological phenomenon with significance for humanity, but Christ is a cosmic event with significance for the planet!”⁵

II The Suffering Body of Christ In Creation

“When the earth stopped, ecology recovered.” Although it was too swift to pronounce this, one can also say that as an immediate response to the pandemic, we felt the earth resting even briefly. This experience shows even more clearly that humans are responsible for ecosystem problems, and how deeply does human activity affect ecology.

We can note both positive and negative environmental impacts. Among the positive effects: reduction of air pollution and GHGs (greenhouse gases) emission, reduction of water pollution,

⁵ R. Rolheiser, Christ as Cosmic, ronrolheiser.com, Nov. 25, 2001 and Sept. 4, 2011.

reduction of noise pollution, ecological restoration and assimilation of tourist spots. We also heard reports and even personal experiences of seeing more variety of birds in our parks, oceans and rivers turning bluer, parks turning greener and trees bearing more fruits.⁶

However, this good news has been short lived. Not only were the ecological concerns pushed to the back seat as countries put all their energies to responding to the pandemic, but the Covid virus created its own ‘pollution’ (increase of biomedical waste generation, including plastic, haphazard disposal of safety equipment, municipal solid waste generation, and reduction of recycling, etc.). Moreover, countries are preparing to boost up their economies in the coming months which could even worsen the ecological issues already at tipping points. It has been estimated that despite declines in carbon emission caused by lockdowns and travel restrictions worldwide, emissions will rise substantially above warning levels as economies begin to recover. The Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC), whose reports underpins the decision making at the global COP, said the world’s scientific community came together to lay out in extreme detail the reality that climate change is ‘unequivocally’ being caused by human activity.⁷

LS called our attention to the responsibility of the human community in the continuing destruction of the cosmos, even during pandemic times. “To commit a sin against the natural world is to commit a sin against ourselves and against God” (LS # 8). It was to Adam/humanity the stewardship was given when he was set in the Garden of Eden “to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15; LS, 67). But in that stewardship, humanity was corrupted and failed in properly keeping and making the environment evolve and yield the fruits and the distribution of provisions for all. The evils of

⁶ Tanjena Rume and S.M. Didar Ul-Islam, Environmental effects of COVID-19 pandemic and potential strategies of sustainability (nih.gov). Published online 2020 Sep 17. doi: 10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e04965.

⁷ AR6 Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis — IPCC.

greed, pride and arrogance predominated rather than self-control, firmness, humility and the sense of dependence on God. The whole creation, including us, is groaning (Rom. 8: 18-25) but the Son of God, in his incarnation, united himself with each individual human person (GS, 22) and it is through such union with the whole humanity that the failures of all could be rectified.

1. Disconnecting the Pandemic and Ecology

Before the pandemic, climate change and global warming were considered urgent and priority. Pope Francis declared a climate emergency on June 14, 2019 and said that ecological concerns are “a global problem with grave [environmental, social, economic, and political] implications”. The following year, concern for climate emergency has been relegated due to the emergence of Covid-19 as every country acted swiftly to limit its spread. However, we cannot treat the climate crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic as unconnected and respond separately.

The influential Climate Change Conference (COP26) ⁸, originally scheduled for 2020 was moved to Nov 2021. Moreover, countries were not able to submit their climate change reports and plans. COP announced that the world will not meet its target of limiting the temperature increase of 1.5 degrees Celsius as the latest UN synthesis report released Sept 2017 that the world is on a trajectory of 2.7 degrees Celsius by the end of the century. “At 1.5 degrees Celsius, we are telling our kids that we, the adults in charge of the Earth now, are handing over the planet in a less livable state for all.”

COP26 warns “Not only are we adding to the problem, we are adding to it at the fastest rate possible. There is no more room to maneuver, which means the only way out is 100% sustainability. We are in the last-chance saloon”, said David King of the Climate Crisis Advisory Group.

⁸ David Vetter, COP26: Why The UN Climate Conference Matters Like Never Before (forbes.com).

By 2050, rising sea levels mean that Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia and Mumbai, one of India's biggest cities, will no longer be livable due to rising sea levels and storms at sea. 2021 has been a most violent year as countries experienced extreme summers, record heat waves and major bush fires. COP26 calls on decisive and collective international decisions and actions. "What we do over the next 5 years will determine the future of humanity for the next millennium."

2. The Fragility of an Interconnected Life

The Covid-19 pandemic has vividly taught the whole humanity, at a stroke, the unseen deeper interdependence of the whole human race and the human dependence and bonding to the whole ecosphere through which friendly as well as deadly viruses grip humanity. Viruses have no differentiation based on geographic boundary, caste, color, creed, gender, age, culture, social status, etc. In the face of the threat of virus, the whole humanity remains as one body ever. So, under the grip of the deadly virus, the dictum, "no one is safe until all are safe" has convincingly proved the unity and interconnectedness of the whole humanity in all aspects (LS 70). The pandemic has shown us how deep and fragile this interconnection is. It has also shown powerfully how unjust economic and political systems worsen such fragility.

The health of the planet is particularly significant to Asia as the novel corona virus started in Wuhan China. Health experts opine that Asia's economic growth - its rapid urbanization and industrialization, increase in per capita income and fastest growing cities - have come with serious consequences - and one of them is the sharp increase in zoonotic diseases such as Covid 19 (as well as Ebola (1976), HIV (1981), Hanta/Sin Nombre (1993), Hendra (1994), bird flu (1997), Nipah (1998), West Nile (1999), SARS (2002-3), MERS (2012), Ebola redux (2014).

It has been discovered that more than sixty percent of the emerging infectious diseases that affect humans are zoonotic and

more than two-thirds of those have their origin in wildlife. We can expect zoonotic epidemics and pandemics to continually increase because of increasing encroachment of natural spaces, populated areas becoming even more dense, and increasing interactions of people across continents for business, tourism, and migration.⁹

Moreover, Covid-19 also spreads faster in a dirty environment and polluted air, contributing to what many ecological advocates believe that this pandemic is a human-induced disaster with fast and hazardous modernization that produced such air pollution coming from road traffic, shipping, agriculture, domestic heating and power generation. These advocates, echoing LS, strongly believe that this pandemic emerged out of the unsustainable model of economic development that also is largely responsible for climate change.¹⁰ According to their analysis, the global Covid-19 pandemic and climate crisis are both rooted in the unrestrained and unsustainable capitalist production and also consumption patterns that looks at development at the expense of the environment (LS 5, 9, 50, 59,162, 164, 230). Based on this analysis, transforming the unsustainable practices of the neo-liberal capitalism is integral to the human solution to this pandemic and climate crisis.

“Disregard for the duty to cultivate and maintain a proper relationship with my neighbor, for whose care and custody I am responsible, ruins my relationship with my own self, with others, with God and with the earth. When all these relationships are neglected, when justice no longer dwells in the land, the Bible tells us that life itself is endangered.” (LS 70). This is a good framework to look at our relationships in a multi-faceted way in this pandemic.

Our Relationship with Animal Life

⁹ Hao Hang, Covid-19 and the Environment: Reflections on the Pandemic in Asia. EnviroLab Asia: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/envirolabasia/vol4/iss1/2>

¹⁰ Thomas Heyd. Covid-19 and climate change in the times of the Anthropocene - Thomas Heyd, 2021 (sagepub.com)

Although there is no conclusive evidence yet, it is becoming clear at this point in scientific research that the Covid-19 virus was transmitted to humans from bats through other animals (called “vectors”). Some probable human-animal interface that bring about emerging zoonotic diseases such as Covid-19 are live animal markets and animal farming. In the past, wildlife hunting gave way to the Ebola and HIV viruses.

When the natural balance existing among animals and pathogens is disturbed, then the transmission of pathogens (bacteria, viruses, fungi) to humans becomes more probable, although it does not happen all the time. With the encroachment into natural habitats - by livestock grazing, excessive mining, deforestation (logging) and land development - the contact between pathogens and vectors increases, and these in turn would transmit the pathogens to domesticated animals and humans. Around half of the zoonotic diseases that have emerged in humans since 1940 resulted from changes in land use - when forested land is transformed for crop and livestock production which promotes the close contact of people and livestock to animals’ natural habitats.

The origins of the Nipah virus followed that route. It passed from bats to pigs, then to humans in 1998, as the result of widespread pig farming and deforestation in Malaysia. There is still no vaccine for Nipah, which kills up to 75 per cent of people it infects. In Australia the Hendra virus had the same history: deforestation forced bats carrying the virus to populated areas, infecting people and horses. The predecessor of the Covid-19 virus, the coronavirus SARS-CoV-1 which caused the 2002-04 outbreak, has been traced back to cave-dwelling horseshoe bats. There is no direct evidence of transmission from bats to humans, but the more probable vectors were the masked palm civets at a wildlife market in Guangdong, China.

Wildlife hunting for food in poor countries is a complex problem. It cannot be totally banned because it is the only viable source of protein for indigenous peoples. But the danger of

wildlife acting as vectors of viruses to infect humans is always there. It is often proposed that indigenous people and local communities would depend less on wildlife for food if they are given monetary incentives for their contribution to the protection of local biodiversity.

While local communities may readily understand the need to preserve the biodiversity of their place, that may not be the case if one is dealing with some business investors. Once these are driven only by greed, long-term effects on ecology take the back seat in their plans. Nonetheless, at present, there are signs of a heightened ecological consciousness among land developers.

Our Relationship with Non-living Things

The pandemic has created its own ‘pollution’ ...as humans, how do we relate and respond to such? The call for integral ecological culture also calls on us to change our lifeways, even the way we deal with wastes. We all know that before the pandemic, waste management was already a big issue.

1. Health-care Waste

City	Population	Healthcare waste	Healthcare waste	%increase
		Pre-Covid: tons/day	During Covid: tons/day	
Hanoi	8 Million	27	160	493%
Manila	14 M	47	280	496%
Jakarta	10.6 M	35	212	506%
Bangkok	10.5M	35	210	500%
KL	7.7 M	26	154	492%

The UNEP (UN Environment Program) figures above would be higher now, with the recent surge and variants in the Covid cases. Even then, the information gives us a picture of how

real is the waste disposal problem. ¹¹Find below a comparative table on mask use¹²

Table 1. Estimated daily facemask use in the world with accumulated confirmed COVID-19 cases

Country	Population ^a	COVID-19 cases	Urban population %	Total daily facemask use (pieces)	Discarded facemasks (tons/day)
Asia	4,628,322,315	22,315,871	50.9%	3,769,305,693	11,308
Africa	1,358,208,732	3,356,223	43.8%	951,832,679	2,855
Europe	747,882,582	28,216,000	74.5%	891,476,038	2,674
North America	591,669,479	28,558,410	82.6%	781,950,383	2,346
South America	432,731,157	14,926,579	85.5%	591,976,223	1,776
Oceania	42,567,863	49,677	67.8%	46,177,618	139

^a Data retrieved on January 21, 2021 (Woldometer 2021b)

¹¹ UNEP 2020, Waste Management during Covid-19 Pandemic. <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/33416/WMC-19.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

¹² D. Hantoko, et al, “Challenges and Practices on Waste Management and Disposal during the Pandemic”, *Journal of Environmental Management*, Vol. 286, May 2021. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0301479721002024>.

Table 2. Estimated daily facemask use in selected Asian countries with accumulated confirmed COVID-19 case.

Country	Population	COVID-19 cases	Urban population (%)	Total daily facemask use (pieces) ^a	Disca facen (tons) ^b
China	1,439,323,776	88,701	61%	1,404,780,005	4,214
India	1,387,530,727	10,611,719	35%	777,017,207	2,331
Indonesia	275,127,290	951,651	56%	246,514,052	740
Pakistan	223,256,147	527,146	35%	125,023,442	375
Bangladesh	165,599,479	530,271	39%	103,334,075	310
Japan	126,259,973	339,774	92%	185,854,680	558
Philippines	110,388,276	507,717	47%	83,011,984	249
Vietnam	97,824,681	1546	38%	59,477,406	178
Turkey	84,842,191	2,406,216	76%	103,168,104	310
Iran	84,588,146	1,354,520	76%	102,859,186	309

Thailand	69,897,587	12,795	51%	57,036,431	171
Myanmar	54,612,547	135,721	31%	27,087,823	81
S. Korea	51,293,799	73,918	82%	67,297,464	202
Iraq	40,718,860	611,407	73%	47,559,628	143
Afghanistan	39,410,451	54,483	25%	15,764,180	47
Saudi Arabia	35,113,472	365,775	84%	47,192,506	142
Uzbekistan	33,737,441	78,219	50%	26,989,953	81
Malaysia	32,595,582	172,549	78%	40,679,286	122
Yemen	30,187,320	2115	38%	18,353,891	55
Nepal	29,425,912	268,646	21%	9,887,106	30
Taiwan	23,840,809	872	79%	30,134,783	90
Sri Lanka	21,463,233	55,189	18%	6,181,411	19
Kazakhstan	18,901,121	172,412	58%	17,540,240	52.62
Syria	17,734,143	13,313	60%	17,024,777	51.07
Cambodia	16,846,976	453	24%	6,469,239	19.41

a

The urban population in Asian countries was taken from (Woldometer, 2021a) (Woldometer, 2021c).

2. The Plastic Problem: World Economic Forum reported that Covid-19 pandemic has produced massive plastic wastes – from hospitals, household and industries. It has triggered an estimated global use of 129 billion face masks and 65 billion gloves per month. In China, daily production rate of face masks soared 116 million in Feb 2020, 12x higher than the previous month. Some plastic wastes find their way into the seas and endangering wildlife. One of the biggest factors in the surge of plastic trash has been food delivery as well as deliveries from online shopping. Delivery apps, such as Grab in Singapore, reported a 400% increase in orders; food panda in Thailand a

300%. Thailand Environment Institute reported a 50% increase per day in amount of plastic waste from January to April 2020.¹³

3. Electronic devices waste: In 2019, before the pandemic, global e-waste was 53.6 million metric tons. During the pandemic, though expected to double, actually decreased by 4.6 million metric tons, as consumptions decreased with businesses slowing down. It is important to note however that only 17% of e-waste are documented and go through formal recycling, and the rest are managed in substandard ways.¹⁴

Our Relationship with Other People

Just a few months before the pandemic broke out, a Canadian psychologist, Dr. Steven Taylor, published *The Psychology of Pandemics*. What was considered by other publishers who had turned down his work for being an irrelevant topic in 2019 became a useful reference manual for anyone who is grappling with the social upheavals that shook the world so rapidly. “Put simply, pandemics of infectious disease are not just events in which some infectious “bug” spreads throughout the world. Pandemics are events in which the population’s psychological reactions to infection play an essential role in both the spreading and containment of the disease, and influence the extent to which widespread emotional distress and social disorder occur.”¹⁵

With the necessary intervention of international and national political leaders to contain the pandemic, the fear in people’s hearts was at times exacerbated, not mitigated. At least in England a group of doctors acknowledged the error in using fear

¹³ Hao Hang, *ibid*.

¹⁴ C.P. Balde and R. Kuehr, Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on E-waste in the First Three Quarters of 2020. United Nations University/United Nations Institute for Training – co-hosting the SCYCLE Program, Bonn (Germany), 2021.

¹⁵ Steven Taylor, *The Psychology of Pandemics* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 2. See also D. Duets, et.al., “Electronic Waste Pollution and the Covid-19 Pandemic”, *Environ Chem Lett.* 2022; 20 (2): 971-974.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8314023/>

to control the behavior of the population with the end of controlling the pandemic. In the Philippines, the common sight has been to see armed policemen manning check-points. Tens of thousands were arrested for breaking the evening curfew, the effectiveness of it was questioned. As if this abuse of power were not enough, more recently, investigations are underway to check on reports of the government's misuse of huge amounts of money allotted to medical supplies.

This brought about the spread of conspiracy theories that range from alleged plots to take away peoples' basic freedoms to sinister plots to kill people through the long-term effects of the vaccines. It has also become a battle of some governments to make vaccination compulsory against those who refuse them, for health or even religious reasons. This scenario was common in many economically-developed countries.

Through this pandemic we realized how necessary and relevant are the principles of the Social Doctrines of the Church. If the principle of the common good were guiding those holding political power as well as the citizens, conflicts and extremist stands could have been avoided. We find this principle expressed in the Holy See's moral guidelines issued last year on the morality of using vaccines developed from cell lines derived from aborted fetuses. The document advises those who refuse to be vaccinated to take extra measures (like wearing a mask) for their own health and that of their neighbor.

Pope Francis reminds us: "A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings" (LS 91).

3. The 'Suffering Servant' in the Cosmos

Many believers were asking if God has abandoned them or where was God in all these? Our faith tells us that God was and is present and in the midst of this suffering in our lives and in our world.

We know God has not abandoned us as God said in one of the most popular psalms: “Even if a mother abandons you, I will not...I have engraved you on the palms of my hand.” (Isa 49: 15-16) Indeed, we are part of God’s very body! This passage reminds us of one of the songs of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh, the context of this psalm. It would be good to retrieve also the biblical concept of Jesus as the Suffering Servant, suffering with and healing humanity and the cosmos (Isa 52:13-53: 12; 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 50:4-11; 52:13-53).

The suffering servant is Yahweh’s servant (Isa 53:11; 42:1-4; 49:3) “whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights. I have sent my spirit upon him” (Isa 42:1-4). These words remind us of Jesus’ baptismal mission and likewise, his prophetic mission. “The spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, freedom to captives...” (Lk 4:18-19)

Isaiah 49 says through him, God’s glory will be manifested (49:3) and God’s good pleasure will be done (53:13). We know that God’s good pleasure and will is the reign of God’s love, justice and peace (Rom 14:17). Justice is a matter of right relationships. The suffering servant, Jesus in the New Testament, comes to bring us into right relationships with God ourselves, with our neighbors and with the world.

The suffering servant “was wounded for our rebellions, crushed because of our guilt...we have been healed by his bruises... (Isa 53:5). This healing is complete, spiritually and physically, as God’s people return to the land. “I have formed you and have appointed you to be the covenant for a people to return the land, to return ravaged properties... to say to the prisoners come out, to those in darkness show yourselves. Along the roadway, they will graze. They will never hunger or thirst. I will guide them to springs of water...I will not abandon you” (Isa 49:8-15).

This salvation is not just for humanity but the suffering servant's light will illumine all nations and the earth. "It is not enough for you to be my servant. I shall make you a light to the nations so that my salvation may reach the remotest parts of the earth". (Isa 49:6).

Isaiah 53 have also been quoted in several NT texts (Mt. 8: 14-17, Lk. 22: 36-38, Jn. 12: 37-41, 1 Pt. 2: 19-25, Acts 8: 32-35, Rom. 10-16-17). These are important biblical texts that are read throughout the Sundays of Advent, each Christmas Mass, on several Sundays during Ordinary Time, Palm Sunday, the Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil. It is also the particular image that Jesus combines with the Son of Man prophecy (Daniel 7) to explain the kind of Messiah He is (allusions to the Eucharist: this is my body and blood, given for your salvation).

The whole Bible witnesses to God's feeling for God's suffering creatures. Above all, God identifies with suffering creatures in the incarnation of the Word, in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. Humanity's sinfulness in the way it related to the cosmos was also borne by our Savior Jesus. Jesus had to taste suffering and death so as to be made the pioneer of human salvation and perfected himself as the Savior in suffering (Heb 2:9-10). "It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should in bringing many sons to glory, make perfect through suffering the leader of their salvation" (Heb. 2: 10). If Jesus has lived in harmony with creation (Mt. 8: 27), then Jesus is also bearing in his body the wounded creation.

The cosmic Christ, deeply connected to every living thing as their energy, spirit and direction (Col 1:15-20) experiences this suffering intimately and is present in the midst of the woundedness of humanity, especially the poorest, and the cosmos. LS 96 ff says that Jesus gazes at every single aspect of creation with tenderness and recognizes God's beauty and care in each small and big aspect of the cosmos. In the midst of all the

woundedness of humanity and the cosmos, the Cosmic Christ turns to them in a pained gaze filled with love and hope.

The Pope's *Urbi et Orbi* blessing with the Blessed Sacrament in that evening of March 27, 2020 (with St Peter's square empty) was an assurance that in the heart of Jesus Christ the pandemic was not a sign of His giving up on the world, but the contrary. The blessing was followed by the Pope's reverent kiss of that Crucifix that had already been a witness to a 16th century epidemic which struck Rome.

III The Healing Body of Christ In Creation

We the Church, as the body of Christ, has suffered deeply in this pandemic, as part of the wounded but also guilty of the wounding because of our sinfulness and greed. "God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of the species as a painful disfigurement." (LS 89). Concern for the environment needs to be joined with sincere love for our fellow humans and an unwavering concern to resolving the problems of society.

The pandemic may be a great opportunity for humankind to realize even more deeply that we are in the same boat and that everything is connected. Regarding national policies and social systems, it can be more clearly seen that the pain and irrational situations experienced by people in this pandemic, especially the poor and marginalized vulnerable, can be powerful opportunities for human development. This pandemic crisis can bring out the best in us as a people. As discussed earlier, we cannot disconnect the pandemic and the ecological situation; to do so would bring us deeper into decay. The following Asian cultural, philosophical and theological resources can energize faith communities of all religions towards wholistic healing. Although we have yet to see widespread practices of integrated living as people and governments are still trying to establish the new normal amidst the ever-changing rhythm of the Covid variants, the following

exploration of these philosophies as innate in the Asian and Christian ethos give us hope.

1. Ecological Conversion and Wholistic (*kata-holos*) Healing

Integral Ecology

The integral ecology of Pope Francis points us to where we should we look for the healing of the Body of Christ in the ecological context. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis clarifies the relationship between environmental deterioration and human and ethical degradation (LS 56) For him, the real healing of the body of ecology is realized by the healing of all human relationships. “If the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity, we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships” (LS 119). For that reason, he proposes an ‘integral ecology’ (Chapter 4) respecting its ‘human and social dimensions’ (LS 137), which includes environmental, economic, social, cultural ecology and ecology of daily life. Ecological conversion (LS 216-221) is the most important step.

The solutions to the complex causes of the pandemic “will not emerge from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality” and “cannot be dealt with from a single perspective or from a single set of interests” (LS 110). Thus, aside from scientific theories and interdisciplinary mediations, the Pope insists that there is a need to critically include “various cultural riches of different peoples, their art and poetry, their interior life and spirituality” (LS 63).

A few years later, in his encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*, he gives a warning: “Once this health crisis passes, our worst response would be to plunge even more deeply into feverish consumerism and new forms of egotistic self-preservation.” (no.35). The pandemic has revived the “sense that we are a global community, all in the same boat, where one person’s problems are the problems of all” (FT 32); forces us to “recover our concern for

human beings, for everyone, rather than for the benefit of a few” (FT 33) by rethinking our styles of life, our relationships, the organization of our societies and, above all, the meaning of our existence (FT 34). He called on all to rekindle their “passion to create a community of belonging and solidarity” (FT 37).

Wholistic (kata-holos) Healing

With a doctoral degree in both science and theology, Iliia Delio is fascinated by the vast and deep interconnectedness of human beings, God, and the universe. Studying both Bonaventure and Chardin, she proposes to retrieve the meaning of ‘catholic’ as wholistic. She says the translation ‘universal’ is based on the early church's translation of the Greek *katholikos* into the Latin *universalis*. For her, it does not capture the rich meaning of *katholikos* as the ancient Greeks used it. "Katolikos means 'through the whole' or 'throughout the whole,' " she says. "It connotes an active consciousness of the whole or a seeking to make whole."¹⁶

For her, Jesus came to bring us life to the fullest (John 10:10). "Jesus taught us that salvation is about whole-making and healing," she continues, "It's not this grace of being rescued from a depraved, fallen world. It's that grace of love that heals us. I think that's what it means to be saved: to be healed and to be whole and to be sent on our way to be whole-makers ourselves."

She also believes that if we only look at the woundedness and the breakdown, it is a closed system way of thinking, and we will only see that we are moving towards death. She believes that the cosmos is an open system. "An open system has a capacity for newness. New basins of attraction arise within the system and pull it, over time, in a new pattern of life. Chaos is a saving grace," she says, adapting the notion of chaos theory from physics. Open systems, she says, remain open to their surrounding environment,

¹⁶ Iliia Delio, *Making All Things New: Catholicity, Cosmology, Consciousness*. (Maryknoll New York: Orbis Books, 2015); Delio breathes new life into term 'catholic' | National Catholic Reporter (ncronline.org).

and they respond to changes in the environment by reorganizing themselves.

2. Asian View of Salvation: a True Ecosophy for All

“The Church in Asia sings the praises of the ‘God of salvation’ (Ps 68:20) for choosing to initiate his saving plan on Asian soil, through men and women of that continent. It was in fact in Asia that God revealed and fulfilled his saving purpose from the beginning. ... In ‘the fullness of time’ (Gal 4:4), he sent his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ the Saviour, who took flesh as an Asian!” (EA 1). The Church in Asia plays a significant role in humanity’s and the earth’s journey to healing. Part of ‘the salt of the earth and light of the world’ (Mt 5: 13-14; LG 9, 33), it has to ferment the whole set of plural cultures and religions for an upward evolution, in the manner of the self-sacrifice of Christ leading to the resurrection for the whole humanity. Asian Church has to trace the path from religious tolerance to religious collaboration, from cultural distancing to the mosaic of cultural configuration, from selfish distancing from the neighbor to the self-sacrificing embrace of others as one universal family (LS, 89; FT 8, 17, 230). All socio-political values and spiritual views of diverse cultures and religions of Asia are to be brought together for the wellbeing of all and for the common good of all. (cf. EA 6).

Cosmic Consciousness

Human beings are endowed with consciousness that can embrace a whole lot of cosmotheandric mutuality and relations. Human consciousness can unify the everflowing human thoughts, the variety and plurality in the material world with its dynamic processes.¹⁷ Many world cultures have deeper basic teachings on such a unity of human consciousness and awareness.

The Indian spectrograph of the cosmic reality provides a unified vision of material world (Jagat) with five basic elements (*Prathvi, Apas, Tejas, Vayu & Akaśa*) and human beings with five

¹⁷Raomundo Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, 669.

layers of matter (*kośas* of *Annamaya*, *Prāṇamaya*, *Manomaya*, *Vijnānamaya* & *Anandamaya*) and the divine sphere as the tripartite *Sat-Cit-Ananda* (existence, consciousness and bliss respectively).¹⁸ All these function in a rhythm (*rta*), in a cosmic dancing model, as “rhythms inscribed in nature by the hand of the Creator” (LS 71).

Uisang, a seventh century Buddhist monk speaks: “In one is all, in many is one. One is identical to all, many is identical to one.”¹⁹ Life is a network of interrelations. Vietnamese monk and poet, Thich Nhat Hanh shows the way to break out of self-centeredness and to see the interconnections that run deep in human awareness. Looking at a wooden chair meditatively one sees the wood, the tree, the forest, the carpenter, the human mind that works, etc; “we can see the entire universe in all its interwoven and interdependent relations in the chair”. Meditators can see the one in many and the many in one... The chair is not separate. It exists only in its interdependent relations with everything else in the universe.”²⁰

The Hua-yen Chinese Buddhist school teaches that the whole is nothing apart from the parts that make up the whole.²¹ Things cannot exist apart from their interrelations. T. Gyasto, the fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet and the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, observes, “Today more than ever before, life must be characterized by a sense of Universal Responsibility, not only nation to nation and human to human, but also human to other forms of life.”²²

In Taoism, the traditional humanistic-mystic world-vision of China, *Tao* and *Te* are mutually engaging factors. *Te* is the

¹⁸T. Manickam, “Ecology and Environment: The Indian Cosmological Perspective”, in *Ecosophy and Harmony of Nature: Collected Works of Thomas Manickam*, Vol. 1, Ed. S. Alackapally, Bangalore, 2019, p. 71-73.

¹⁹ Cf. Batchelor and Brown, *Buddhism and Ecology*, p.11.

²⁰Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Sun My Heart”, in Batchelor and Brown, *Buddhism and Ecology*, p.12.

²¹T. Manickam, *Ecosophy and Harmony of Nature: Collected Works of Thomas Manickam*, Vol. 1, Ed. S. Alackapally, Bangalore, 2019, p. 28.

²²Batchelor and Brown, *Buddhism and Ecology*, p. 15.

individuating and integrating factor in the wider sphere of *Tao* which is interpreted as the order of the nature. This sort of integration is more aesthetic than logical and that stresses interdependence and collaboration of the particulars in their own environment for co-existence.²³

A True Ecosophy for All: Converging the Sciences, Philosophy and Spirituality

The dignity, wellbeing and common good of all humans are primary goals of human concerns. These goals are to be attained in the given human habitat, in the ecological arena of the created world. But this ecological arena is a quasi-mysterious web of relations and interdependence of many realities of the natural world (LS 76, 92). This web of world realities extends from microorganisms to macro level beings such as humans and their global organizations at the levels of physical, psychic and spiritual realms of functioning. All such levels of functioning of all entities, especially *humans*, cannot survive without keeping harmony and balance of all beings on the globe with ecological sanity.

This ecological web of our common home has physical, cultural, scientific, philosophical, ethical, theological and spiritual concerns. (LS 202, 209, 231; FT,257). We need a true and basic Ecosophy that emphasizes a holistic vision, in which this world, humankind and God could be seen in a holistic vision as a cosmotheandric integrated reality. The whole creation is on a wonderful pilgrimage woven together by love of God for each creature (LS 92). In such a vision humans could not be domineering agents but stewards and participants. In fact, humans are only a set of partners with the common whole as Raomundo Panikkar would explain, "The three worlds of divine, the cosmic and the human are differentiated, but not separated; they are three dimensions of the one and same reality, and it is

²³cf. Ames, *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*, p. 142.

precisely this three-dimensionality, as it were, which makes reality one.”²⁴

According to modern Quantum physics that revolutionized the classical static physics, the universe is one indivisible dynamic whole whose parts are essentially interrelated and can be understood only as patterns of a cosmic process.²⁵ Humans have the power of breaking the barriers of individuality, enter into cosmic consciousness and act out with a universal awareness in harmony for the common good of all. In such a case individuals transcend selfishness and work for the cosmic purpose. In such a state of consciousness one becomes aware of the working of the cosmic forces and their movements and finds their working as part of one's own self. At that level one finds the individual self and the universe working simultaneously with the Transcendent Being.²⁶ One sees the same life force, God's love as the moving force, in all created things (LS 77).

The created world, as the Symbol of the Divine, is a book of revelation (LS, 85). According to M. Eliade, “the world is impregnated with sacredness. It is not simply a sacrality communicated by gods; they manifested the different modalities of the sacred in the very structure of the world and of cosmic phenomena.”²⁷ The Bible confirms: “Ever since the creation of the world his invisible power and divinity has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.” (Rom. 1:20). J. Moltmann holds, “The creator indwells in the creatures, animates them, holds them in life, and leads them into the future of his kingdom.”²⁸ T. Manickam affirms: “All aspects of creation have a numinous

²⁴Raomundo Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience: Mantramanjari*, 658.

²⁵Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point: Science, Society and the Rising Culture*, New York, Bantam Books, 1982, p. 66.

²⁶cf. Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, p. 974.

²⁷M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, (Trns. W.R. Trask), New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959, p. 116.

²⁸J. Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, London, SCM, 1985, p.14.

quality, are a mode of divine presence, because each thing, and the universe as a whole, exists in the divine consciousness.”²⁹

It is a scientifically proved fact that the earth and its material components are undergoing constant changes by way of evolution according to the natural law set as an involution by the Creator. Humanity, inhabiting on this earth, is fully subject to the natural evolution of this earth. Further, this earth and its inhabitants are inherently linked to the influences of the unending galaxies of the universe that are inconceivable to the finite human mind. Ecologically, the whole creation is in interdependence, in the mode of a complex web of relations. No human society can stand outside that phenomenon of evolution. Hence, the perennial philosophies of East and West affirm that reality is one, as an integrated whole, in the mode of unity in diversity, that is governed by the transcendent Spirit. In this web of relations human beings are endowed with consciousness that reviews what is happening inwardly and outwardly in the universe. In their consciousness, humans can experience the invisible divinity through the visible world of realities (cf. Rom 1:20).

3. A Spirituality of Harmony

Living in interreligious and intercultural contexts, a Theology of Harmony has been forwarded by OTC almost 30 years ago (Theology of Harmony, FABC Papers No. 75) and takes on a different meaning today. This theology builds up on above reflection on a true ecosophy for all as we live a cosmotheandric vision. This document proclaims that Asians can work for harmony as it is organic in their ethos and lifeways, giving comprehensive examples:

1) In the midst of its political, economic, and cultural differences, Asians can also harmoniously work together: socio political (even in the midst of monarchies, democracies and nationalist ideologies; Pancasila in Indonesia; ahimsa in India, also

²⁹T. Manickam, *Ecosophy and Harmony of Nature: Collected Works of Thomas Manickam*, Vol. 1, Ed. S. Alackapally, Bangalore, 2019, p. 48.

non-violent revolution in the Philippines; trade unionism; NGOs POs and COs; education and cultural efforts); economic (Grameen banking, proliferation of SLAs, ASEAN, APEC; Confucian management – self interest in subordination to the common good); as well as ecological care.

2) In Asia’s different religions: Buddhism espouses *nirvana* – non self, dynamic stillness and compassion for all; Four Noble Truths – reality of suffering and its end; internal and external balance. Hinduism promotes lokasamgraha - general well-being of entire reality; *dharma* – constituent parts held together; cosmic, social, individual are mutually interdependent, disruption spell doom. Islam stands for *shura* – deliberation or consultation in which no one may impose one’s will on the other, strive for common goals; *ukhuwa basyariyah*- solidarity based on common needs and *responsibility* for universal wellbeing. Chinese Confucianism promotes joy, oneness - *jia he wang shi hen*: where is harmony in the family, everything will prosper; joy of learning, fellowship, personal development, oneness of humankind. Taoism Joy – oneness of creation (“The cosmos and I were born together; and all things and I are one” (Lao Tzu).

3) There are approximately 300 million indigenous peoples in the world; half of them in Asia, with thriving Christian communities. Primal religions are sensitive to fundamental harmony which makes no distinction between sacred and profane, matter and spirit. They are acknowledged for environmental consciousness, ecologically-sound way of life, natural healing practices - coming from a deep spirituality (nature culture and cosmos connected; the sacredness of all things; hence deep respect for natural world and creation; a belief in good and bad spirits residing in material and natural things.

Moreover, the document also reread the Bible and Christianity in the lens of Harmony: the original harmony with creation where there is order, hierarchy of values and mutual relationship of complementarity and service. Disharmony is caused by sin: the sin of Adam/humanity introduced disharmony

in creation – with it, relationships of being wounded with God (Gen 3:8), disharmonies between man and woman (Gen 3), between brothers (Gen 4:12), with fellow human beings (Gen 4:23-24). The flood (Gen 7-8) was a purifying process, with God reestablishing a covenant with humanity and all living creature; the exodus as liberation of humankind from sin and slavery and journey to the Promised Land.

Christ restored harmony. God sent his Son for God so loved the world. **Jesus** is the servant of harmony, healing the sick, forgiving sins, proclaiming Good News even in the face of cultural, religious and political conflicts; even the winds and seas obey him. The reign of God is present in Jesus – a reign of harmony (shalom), justice and joy. Jesus, taking up his cross, was the suffering servant of harmony. The Church then is a servant of dynamic harmony – a *koinonia* – in communion with the God, Jesus in the Holy Spirit. It is called to transcend race, caste, religion and gender (Gal 3: 28, Col 3: 11) and serve the Reign of God.

The above reflection shows the Asian understanding of reality that is profoundly organic – the whole is the sum total of the web of relationships and interaction of the various parts with each other, mutually interdependent. As an Asian value, harmony grounds the integral ecology and cosmic relationship that the Christian faith upholds. With Christ and his body the Church as its servant, harmony can be an integrating and energizing thread of renewal for Asian Church and society in this pandemic.

IV For A Renewed Mission: Integral Pastoral Pathways

The reality of suffering from pandemic, especially the pain of the vulnerable, raises fundamental questions about the way humans have lived and thought. It also poses a challenge to the capabilities of national policy and social institutions. Scientists and environmentalists, as well as the UN, are calling for more sustainable lifeways, such as redirecting postCovid-19 recovery spending to rebuild in a more sustainable manner (sustainable industrialization); reducing conflict between human and natural

systems – deforestation, wildlife trading, intensive agriculture and unsustainable supply chain of raw materials; addressing the climate crisis decisively and without delay, especially to restore the centrality of international cooperation to address global risks (COP26 Agenda). Candotti of the UN also encouraged all to rethink that the pandemic has spatial (“everything we do anywhere on the planet has obvious and severe local repercussions”) and temporal (“every decision we make has repercussion on our neighbors and future generations”) dimensions.

In the aftermath of pandemic shutdown measures and decrease in gross domestic incomes, Asian governments are all set to stimulate their economies in the coming years. How will this affect the environment and eventually people’s health? How serious are Asian countries in pursuing integral ecology, a greener and more sustainable economic and political policies and commitments to the Paris Agreement? How can the Catholic Church with its Gospel challenge of integral culture, harmony and true ecosophy participate in the global renewal process?

1. In the spirit of *Laudato Si*

In the words of Pope Francis “the ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion.” (*LS*, 217). We all need an “ecological conversion” whereby the effects of our encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in our relationship with the world around us. It is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience but an essential part of a life of virtue (*LS*, 217).

The Pope (28 May 2021) asked all to be guided by the seven aims of *Laudato Si*: “the response to the cry of the Earth, the response to the cry of the poor, the ecological economy, the adoption of a simple way of life, ecological education, ecological spirituality and community engagement.”. He suggests some simple and practical ways through which we can educate ourselves and others to adopt a change in lifestyle: “avoiding the

use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices” (LS, 211). Pope Francis has also supported the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development in funding projects and initiatives that respond not only to the victims of pandemic but also to the causes of climate crisis, especially to counter its effects on the poorest communities and countries.

2. In the spirit of *Fratelli Tutti*

The pandemic also beckons us to be “Good Samaritans”. The unprecedented crisis created by the exponential spread of corona virus all over the world, and its disastrous impact on human lives, economy, business, jobs, travel, tourism, worship etc. beckons the Church to respond actively, creatively and urgently, not as the Priest and Levite did, but as the Good Samaritan in the parable of the same name (Cf. Lk 10:25-37). In fact, Christ is the Good Samaritan, who reaches out to the needy in all circumstances. The Church as the Mystical Body of Christ must do the same in obedience to the Lord’s command “Go and do likewise” (Lk 10:37). In his latest Encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis tells us: “In the face of so much pain and suffering (at present due to the pandemic), our only concern is to imitate the Good Samaritan. Any other decision would make us either one of the robbers or one of those who walked by without showing compassion for the suffering of the man on the roadside” (FT 67).

The global pandemic is a great opportunity for the Church for conversion and to be the Good Samaritan. The whole world is wounded and is lying on the roadside. We cannot just pass by. We cannot be indifferent. We cannot look the other way. We must get involved at the local level, parish level, diocesan level, national and international levels to provide medical, material, emotional and spiritual assistance to all in need in our multicultural, multi-religious and pluralistic society in Asia.

3. Spreading the Gospel of Hope

In an environment of fear, pain, uncertainty and hopelessness created by pandemic, one of the important pastoral actions required of pastors is to instil courage and hope in our faithful. Our faith is based on the solid rock that is Jesus Christ who is our Divine Healer. The Gospel gives us the good news of salvation and assures us that the Risen Lord is with us. The angels tell the frightened women at the tomb, “He is not here, he has risen” (Lk 24:6). And Mary Magdalene after encountering the Risen Lord proclaims: “I have seen the Lord” (Jn 20:18). In his World Mission Sunday Message for 2021 Pope Francis admonishes us: “In this time of pandemic, faced with the temptation to mask and justify indifference and apathy in the name of healthy social distancing, there is urgent need for mission of compassion which can make the necessary distancing an opportunity for encounter, care and promotion”. Let us face this challenge with courage and fortitude. And let us instil hope in our faithful so that they too face these challenges with courage and fortitude and be fully resigned to the will of God.

The parishes and faith communities, especially BECs and BHCs, are good places to spread the gospel of hope by putting to daily life practice an integrated harmonious culture of compassionate relationships within the family, the greater neighborhood and towns and with the cosmos.

The FABC Climate Change Desk has just started *Laudato Si* Action Platform (LSAP) and is being promoted Asia-wide. It is an action-oriented 7-year ecological conversion journey to empower families, communities and institutions to achieve total sustainability. LSAP serves seven goals: 1) hearing the cry of the earth; 2) hearing the cry of the poor; 3) ecological economics; 4) adoption of sustainable lifestyles; 5) ecological education; 6) ecological spirituality; 7) community resiliency and empowerment.

Another sign of hope is RAOEN (or the River Above Asia Oceania Ecclesial Network) organized by EcoJesuits supported by the FABC and increasingly becoming more active in Asian local communities, has been promoting integral living and culture-based responses to the issues of land, forest and seas/ rivers, especially focusing on the voices and experiences of indigenous peoples, youth and women and interreligious movements.³⁰ This region shares the common image of the 'river above' referring to the Pacific Ocean, the life feeding all the rivers of Asia. The geographical biomes of Asia and Oceania are rich in diversities which are unique and integral but are now gravely threatened. The ocean and forest communities are both deeply affected by climate change but are also the prime carers and movers for healing and reconciliation. Perhaps more parishes/dioceses and their ecology desks can collaborate more actively with RAOEN as they share a common vision and mission for our common home.³¹

Creation as the Body of Christ: Covenant of Cosmic Harmony

Our reflection showed us that creation is the Body of Christ and how deeply connected is humanity, God and the cosmos in our story of salvation! As all are interconnected, we also saw how deeply linked is the pandemic and the ecological situation and we need to harmonize our actions towards a more healthy and sustainable life.

The Covenant Tradition of our Christian faith is manifested very clearly in creation. The rainbow appearing after the great cleansing flood is a symbol that God renews God's commitment to the whole of humanity and creation. The gift of the Promised Land to Moses and his descendants also symbolizes God's care and dream for God's people and the whole world. The summit of God's covenant has been called "deep incarnation"³²

³⁰ www.Raoen.org

³¹ <https://www.raoen.org/2021/07/21/culture-based-solutions-a-strength-of-growing-reconciliation-with-land-and-seas-through-faith-community-and-nature/>

³² Elizabeth Johnson, RC, Deep Incarnation: Prepare to be Astonished | Segretariato Generale per la Formazione Permanente OSM (wordpress.com).

when the Word of God is “made flesh” (John 1:14), which means this event is not just for human beings, but for the whole interconnected reality of matter and life.

Feminist theologian S. MacFague wrote about the world as God’s body.³³ She posits that believing in this, we will realize that our greatest mission is to respect and care for creation. We will also realize that every breath, everything we eat and use come from God. Together with all humanity, we live with and in God all the time. God is our home.

The Church therefore is at the service of cosmic harmony since it cannot be indifferent to the destiny of the whole creation, as the mediator of this cosmic communion is Jesus Christ through whom all things were made (Jn 1:3). The final appeal of Jesus – and therefore the mission of the Christian communities – to baptize all in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit (Mt. 28: 18-20) means to build up communities based on trinitarian communion; their unity and harmony will be the sign and instrument for the world for its restoration to harmony in Jesus.

Part 3 WALKING FORWARD TOGETHER: A SYNODAL CONVERSION

Asia has always symbolized diversity and plurality – in its many cultures, religions, and ways of living. But the Covid experience has given us a common image – we are one body. We never experienced in more ways than one that what happens to some *body* in a corner in rural China can be experienced by every *body* in all the streets and cities in different parts of Asia (and the world). As a faith community, revisiting the image of the Body of Christ as Church in this time of crisis also offers us new ways of believing and living.

In our theological framework, we mentioned that reflecting on our body experiences in liminal time – the pandemic realities of Asia – will help us see what kind of faith *communitas* are

³³ Sallie MacFague, “The World as God’s Body”, *Concilium* 2 (2002), 50-56.

we called to be so that we can be more faithful and fruitful as disciples of Jesus.

We hope that this Body Theology is our way of contributing to the process of becoming a Synodal Church in Asia. That the Synodal process started in the midst of the pandemic was no coincidence. The crisis became a liminal space for a synodal conversion as we go through the same crisis together, not just with the church but with the rest of humanity. Walking on the same pandemic 'road' together, our whole body was 'listening' to its lessons, sensing where God was leading us – starting as churches in the homes, but also extending our homes as we dialogue and network with others especially those different from us (the local government units, NGOs and other people's movements), on the same mission of healing and empowering the public systems (social, political, economic, ecological) whose weaknesses and inadequacies have been exposed by a global crisis.

We are also aware that FABC is celebrating 50 years of its being a serving body to the Asian churches. How can our reflection on the Body of Christ also contribute to the moving forward of FABC in its theologizing for a more effective ministry/mission, especially regarding the local church, triple dialogue and harmony?

A. The Body of Christ at Home with the World

The call for a Synodal Church – a church that journeys together - starts from becoming aware of the roads we are walking on. A synodal church needs to *“hear the voice of the Spirit; by means of sincere, serene and objective dialogue with our brothers and sisters; by paying attention to the real experiences and challenges of every community and every situation; in the exchange of gifts and in the convergence of all energies in view of building up the Body of Christ and proclaiming the Gospel; in the melting-pot of feelings and thoughts that enable us to understand the Lord's will. (SLMC 113-114)*

“God, in Christ, redeems not only the individual person, but also the social relations existing between them”. In this context, it is an

important obligation and a criterion of all social action of the People of God to hear the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth, and to draw attention urgently, in determining society's choices and plans, to the place and the privileged role of the poor, the universal destination of goods, the primacy of solidarity and care for our common home.” (SLMC 119)

Our bodies locate us, we are where our bodies are. The pandemic made us very aware of our locus and focused us on the space we are living. Even as it limits the time and space when and where we can move, the pandemic has helped us become the Body of Christ at home with the world.

A Body Theology made us realize that the family is the church in the home - as the homes became the one location for worship, studies, work, socializing, etc. The family as the domestic church is challenged to be a catalyst for the creative love of God as the pandemic called for the healing of bodies and relationships in the families going through so much grief, loss, confusion and fear. The parishes or the local churches as the Body of Christ, especially through its smaller BECs, are called to serve the bigger home as they helped their own neighborhood and the wider society survive through small acts of solidarity. The families and the local churches as the Body of Christ are called to deeply respect and intensively promote a more sustainable lifestyle as creation too is the Body of Christ; the cosmos is our common home. Our ecological situation is as much the cause and the source of our woundedness and overall health.

FABC defines a local church as a faith community in a specific place, formed with its encounter with the Gospel and cultures and responding to the challenges of its historical context (*Thesis on the Local Church, FABC Paper # 60*). As the Body of Christ at home with the world, we realize that in the pandemic experience that unifies us, when we mention 'local' in the local church, it means something wider: our faith community living in its specific local space, the cyber-body of Christ (faith communities online) together also with the religious others, the wider local

human community and their cultural energies, and also the cosmos that surrounds us. We are not making the wider human community and the religious others as members of the Catholic Church, but our common corporeal experience in the pandemic makes them integral aspects of our living faithfully as disciples of Jesus.

B. The Body of Christ Humbly Listening to the Other/Others

The Synodal Church is a discerning community that deeply listens.

“Exercising discernment is at the heart of synodal processes and events. Communal discernment allows us to discover God’s call in a particular historical situation. Communal discernment implies carefully and courageously listening to “the groans” of the Spirit (cf. Romans 8,26) which emerge through the explicit or sometimes silent cry that goes up from the People of God: “to listen to God, so that with Him we may hear the cry of His People; to listen to His People until we are in harmony with the will to which God calls us”. (SLMC 113-114)

Our bodies, made up of our five senses, help us listen not just through our ears, but through what we feel and smell and taste. Sharing a common crisis experience in the pandemic, we the Body of Christ became more aware of and sense deeply the pains of humanity near us and even far away from us – family, friends and strangers – we hear them, we see them, we feel their pain because it is also our pain. We have become one body with others.

A Body Theology then helps us become a church that listens intensely to the other/s, providing an inclusive and compassionate presence. God will always be the great Other, who always pushes us to get out of our comfort zones and listen to others humbly, especially to those who are not like us, because we cannot really box or limit God’s revelation to those similar to us or belonging to the same (faith) community. In our solidarity work with people of goodwill in our local areas – with the government, with nongovernmental organizations, people’s movements, civic

organizations, religious groups, especially with the suffering poor and marginalized – we sense God at work in and speaking through the other/s.

We know that our bodies are also very sensitive to our environment. Reacting to our ecological situation, we get sick or healthy. The Covid-19 virus is also a cry, because humanity has not been sensitive and not listening deeply to the pains of the poorest with the unbridled consumerist cultures and corrupt practices of some sectors and of lifestyles that does not give the respect and care due to the cosmos. Because creation is also the body of Christ, we also hear very clearly and experience painfully the groans of creation.

In local churches, as we reframe or redesign pastoral programs to respond to pandemic times, we also consult and listen to those who are not part of our usual planning teams, e.g. the medical doctors, scientists and local governments because we realize pastoral programs now should be beyond ‘church’ issues but should tackle more wholistic and integrated life concerns. Perhaps listening as sensing also deepens our understanding of *Sensus Fidelium* – the collective faith wisdom of the faithful, the ‘living voice of the people of God’. This sensing includes an integrated listening not just to the faithful but to the others and also to the environment as the great Other (God) also speaks through them.

FABC from its very inception, has promoted the triple dialogue (with cultures, with religions and with the poor) as a means of evangelization. Body Theology makes us very aware that this humble listening in dialogue has to extend – to the cosmos, to the religious others, to science especially medical, to technology especially digital, and of course to the youth who are digital natives. As the Body of Christ, we understand that to be Catholic is not just to be universal but to be wholistic - according to the whole, integrated with the cosmos, continuing God’s covenant of harmony with all.

C. The Body of Christ Dancing with the Trinity

Pope Francis teaches that "to walk together is *the constitutive way* of the Church; *the figure* that enables us to interpret reality with the eyes and heart of God; *the condition* for following the Lord Jesus and being servants of life in this wounded time". (SLMC 120).

How can synodality as 'walking together' be configured in Asia? Definitely a lot of local cultural experiences can be promoted; but perhaps 'dancing' can provide not just a good image but also a special perspective of synodality in the Asian churches as the Body of Christ in the midst of the pandemic experience³⁴.

Dancing is a popular communal event in Asian cultures that integrates the spirit, animal and human worlds and performed in times of celebration and supplication, love and war, daily events and special seasons. A lot of Asian dances are also about healing and empowerment (*sinulog* dance in the Philippines, the Chinese *chi gong* dances, the various indigenous dancing rituals for healing of spirits and bodies). In the pandemic, dancing also became a popular activity in *tiktok* and other social media as doctors, patients, police, students, mothers, riders, are seen dancing as a way of releasing stress and keeping healthy in these times.

The body is a relational reality, not only in its body parts and its systems, but also in relation to other bodies (wider community and cosmos). It grows and lives or decays and dies in relation to others. Dancing is also a very relational experience expressed in the five elements that constitute it: *body/movement, energy, space, time, rhythm*. The pandemic has made us more aware of these elements in different but related ways. We have been so conscious of the condition of our and other *bodies* in this time of

³⁴ Candelario, J. and E. Padilla, "*Kapwa, Simbahan, Bayan: The Dance of the Trinity Today*", a paper presented at the online theological conference of Dakateo (Theological Association of the Philippines), Nov. 13, 2021.

sickness. *Space*, on the one hand limited us as we got focused only on our homes as the daily space for life, work, learning, worship, entertainment, socialization, etc. But *space* also expanded us as everything went online and we experienced a different spirit of prayer, innovated work and studying, and discovered new ways of earning our keep and living, even as a 'community'. Dancing makes us more sensing and sensitive to the *movement and rhythm* of the virus as variant after variant circulate among us, slowing down or rushing our coping mechanisms as we gather the *energy* needed in solidarity work, activating and de-activating businesses, closing and opening of borders, the slow, tiring and unending lines for vaccine, food and financial help, etc.

The Church in a special way also 'danced' with the times as churches closed, its religious activities digitalized, and its liturgies joined the frontlines as people's faith energized their struggles for survival; church leaders 'dancing' with people who are different from them as they participated with the wider humanity in solidarity/mission work; church language in formation and seminars danced their way among the scientific and technical speech of a much complex reality they tried to make sense of. Learning to dance this pandemic could give us hope of surviving it.

FABC has always promoted a participatory church based on Trinitarian communion. The word 'perichoresis' has described the life of the Trinity - a moving around each other, an indwelling; a more popular interpretation could also be dancing around each other and going in an outward movement to love. In the Scriptures, creation was also symbolized as 'wisdom dancing' (Prov 8: 1-4, 22-31). The pandemic as liminal experience has given us wisdom on how to become a new *communitas*. In 1975, the OTC has proposed a theology of Harmony as an Asian way of looking at (Trinitarian) communion. Harmony as an Asian ethos receives a special energy as 'dancing'; 'dancing' with the Trinity is a corporeal discerning process; it means being led by the Trinity to new roads. A Body Theology proposes DANCING as another

image of (Trinitarian) communion and harmony. Perhaps the wisdom culled from the pandemic, experienced and articulated through a Body Theology, can create new pastoral pathways for a more integral and sustainable living as a Synodal Church in Asia.

The Body of Christ in our homes, in the cosmos, in the local churches is journeying towards a Synodal Church together with the others. The lessons of the pandemic have been etched in our bodies as we rediscover Christ among us in the midst of the suffering and healing processes we are all going through. Emerging from these processes, a Body Theology becomes an articulation and witness of an integral communal faith at the heart of daily life.

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