

REBUILDING FROM COVID-19: PASTORAL LEADERSHIP TOWARDS A NEW WORLD

Christina Kheng

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic calls for pastoral leadership that is spiritually-rooted, discerning, synodal, humble, and committed to rebuilding a better world. This article outlines a suggested process by which pastoral workers can reflect on the “pandemic year” together with their communities and exercise pastoral leadership in a collaborative way. In doing so, they might model a way of proceeding that brings new vitality to the Church’s life and mission in these challenging times.

Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic took the world by storm, Pope Francis emphasized that “it is a matter of urgency to discern and find the pulse of the Spirit to give impetus, together with others, to dynamics that can witness and channel the new life that the Lord wants to generate at this concrete moment in history. This is the favorable time of the Lord.”¹ Now one year into the pandemic, what signs of “new life” have emerged? How has the past year been a “favorable time of the Lord”? The holy season of Lent and Easter is upon us once again, and so it is perhaps timely to take stock of ourselves, of the church, and of the world in the context of the pandemic. More specifically, where is the “pulse of the Spirit”? What is God’s call for us during this unprecedented time? When the Vatican COVID-19 Commission was established a year ago, the Pope highlighted that we do not simply prepare for the future but we *prepare the future*, especially by discerning what a better new normal would be and by proactively taking steps to rebuild it in collaboration with others. This certainly serves as an important model for pastoral leadership. The following sections elaborate on what this might entail.

Searching the Heart

A good starting point is to deepen our awareness of our own interior life and personal situation. The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly impacted the daily life of many pastoral workers, albeit in diverse ways. While some have actually fallen ill with the virus, others have found themselves quarantined, separated from their families and communities, and gripped with fear and anxiety for themselves and their loved ones. Many have been busy finding ways to meet the material and spiritual needs of people, whether in-person or online. Still others have found themselves with unexpected free time and used it for spiritual renewal, reading, and reflection. Hence, a good way to begin taking stock of the “pandemic year” is to become more aware of oneself and especially of how God has been present in one’s life. The *personal examen*, from the tradition of Ignatian Spirituality, can serve as a useful tool to this end. A variation of it entails recalling prayerfully the events that have passed, taking

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

note of consolations and desolations, bringing them into dialogue with the direction of one's life, and trying to see the signs of God's activity. This examen could then illuminate the areas of one's life that are in need of greater care, encouragement, or conversion. Some pastoral workers might also need to deal with accumulated emotional stresses, such as by unburdening them before the loving presence of God or sharing about them with a confidante, and being open to God's healing touch. In this unprecedented time, pastoral workers should not neglect self-care even as they attend to the needs of others. Thus strengthened "with God's power" in their "innermost self" (Ephesians 3:16), they can then pursue God's will together with others for a better world.

Communal Awareness

Along with the personal examen, pastoral workers can also initiate gatherings of their communities to share experiences and walk more closely with one another. Be it a religious congregation, a parish, or a neighborhood community, small group conversations can be organized within appropriate safety distancing requirements of each local context. Group members can reflect on and speak about their significant events during the year, including their feelings, insights, joys, and struggles, and even how these have evolved as the year progressed. This enables group members to become more aware of how each one has been affected by the pandemic, and thus engenders empathy, mutual understanding, care, and solidarity. Members can also discern collectively about God's presence in the group. How has God been moving the group? What graces have been received during the year? What is God revealing?

Reading the Signs of the Times

At the same time, the group can take stock of the signs of the times. What is happening in the surrounding society and in the wider world? How has the pandemic affected people? Is there a new normal emerging? Where are the lights and shadows? What have been some signs of God's life-giving activity? In order to undertake such an enquiry, however, the group needs to adopt an appropriate set of lenses with which to read the signs of the times. Otherwise, it may unwittingly imbibe just whatever has been trending in the headlines of popular media. Such headlines tend to be dominated by political, ideological, or socio-economic biases or skewed by "filter bubbles." A more appropriate set of lenses

would stem from the group's core values and priorities of mission. For instance, a parish group could refer to the priorities in its current pastoral plan and formulate some questions accordingly. If one of these priorities is to strengthen family life, for example, the parish group could then ask: How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected family life? What is the current situation of family life, one year into the pandemic? As another example, a religious congregation with a charism of youth formation could ask: How has COVID-19 affected the youth? What are the opportunities and challenges in their education and formation?

As can be seen, a proper lens enables the group to identify the main concerns to investigate, the right questions to ask, the criteria for evaluating lights and shadows, and the particular peoples to attend to, which might otherwise be neglected in public and popular discourse. At the same time, when seeking the answers, the group can be mindful of getting out of its box, and listening to a variety of voices from diverse fields. These could include persons who can give a big-picture view, as well as those who are close to the ground, especially amidst the most marginalized and vulnerable. Group members can reflect more deeply on the information gathered and spiritually discern the critical issues they feel called to address as a group. An indispensable disposition for such an undertaking is to come to the conversation with an openness to learn rather than to advance one's own agenda. In this way, group members' mutual desire for the common good and for God's will would stand in contrast with a negative tendency widely observed throughout the pandemic to exploit the COVID situation for one's own benefit.

Disruption or Opportunity?

In relation to the signs of the times, the pandemic has certainly highlighted several areas in which the Church and the world can build back better. In this regard, the disruptions of COVID can also be seen as opportunities to address key challenges which had already been present in some way prior to the pandemic. Among the most significant is the prevalence of inequality, injustice, and ecological abuse. Indeed, the poor and vulnerable have been facing increased marginalization and exploitation around the world, and the COVID pandemic has hit them the hardest. Disadvantaged communities in the pandemic also tend to be ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples, stateless persons, migrants, "dalits," urban slum dwellers, and daily-

wage or informal economy workers. Besides lacking healthcare, food, shelter, sanitation, and losing their livelihoods, the poor have also faced additional stigma and prejudices in COVID because they are often blamed for their lack of hygiene and safe distancing and thus for spreading the virus. On a positive note, the pandemic has highlighted their plight and mobilized many people to initiate spontaneous acts of kindness and longer-term programs. The Church can certainly build on this positive momentum and strengthen people's sense of solidarity while also fostering efforts to redress underlying injustices. At the same time, a closer pastoral presence with the most neglected poor is very much needed. Although it may not be easy to help them regain their livelihoods given the current economic outlook, the most important accompaniment is often about simply being with those in need throughout their difficult journey so that they know they are not alone. Such solidarity can make a big difference between perseverance and despair.

On the ecological front, the pandemic has kindled concern for the environment, with some people re-examining their lifestyles and some governments pledging to "build back greener." However, the use of plastics and other disposables has increased in the past year and may persist in the new normal. Many businesses might also prioritize economic recovery over environmental protection. Exploitation of natural resources has also gone unchecked while regulatory attention diverted towards the pandemic. The Church thus needs to step up its advocacy on integral ecology and seek more collaboration with local and global networks for our common home.

One new opportunity that has been opened up by the pandemic pertains to values and beliefs. Around the world, governments and civic organizations have expressed a desire to build a better "new normal." However, this necessitates examining existing norms and clarifying better common values. Pastoral workers can foster wider conversations around the common good and encourage reflection about what constitutes the holistic good of all creation. Various segments of society could come together to share their wisdom traditions and dialogue with one another.

At the individual level, many people have also found themselves pondering about the meaning and purpose of their lives. COVID-19 has disrupted daily routines and robbed many people of their long-held jobs and opportunities for education and employment. Pandemic fatigue and anxiety have also led to spiralling mental health issues and even suicide. In addition, the question of

suffering has come to the fore, and some wonder where God is in this crisis or whether the pandemic has been God's will. Pastoral workers need to reach out to people in these moments of struggle and questioning, and accompany them to reflect on life's fundamental issues so that they can experience God's love, discover the true meaning of their lives, and gain newfound hope.

The area of youth formation is another critical need highlighted by the pandemic. Many young people have experienced prolonged destabilization during the pandemic. Not only has school life been interrupted frequently and unpredictably, but family and social life have come under stress as well, and prospects in the economy are not hopeful. At-risk youths face increased dangers of harm and exploitation, including human trafficking, drug abuse, crime, internet addiction, radicalization, and permanent drop-out from school. Although online learning has opened up new possibilities and opportunities, it has also widened the digital divide. On a positive note, the spontaneous volunteerism, creative enterprise, and determination of many youth have been palpable. Pastoral workers need to accompany the youth more closely, listen to them, even learn from them, and help this "COVID generation" negotiate this unprecedented time.

Finally, on the religious front, the disruption of communal gatherings has caused many to question what their faith is all about when religious routines have been taken away. Among Catholics, online alternatives have produced mixed results, enabling some people to feel more meaningfully engaged and gain a newfound appreciation especially for the Eucharist, while causing others to drift away. In some local communities, the inability to hold rituals that have deep religious and cultural significance has also caused considerable tension. Moreover, unable to carry out their usual responsibilities over a prolonged period, not a few pastoral workers, including priests and religious, have found themselves confronted with questions of identity, role, and vocation. Restrictions on travel and large group gatherings have also raised the spotlight on the important role of lay leaders at the local grassroots level, as well as the role of parents in faith formation within families. At the theological level, these restrictions have prompted questions about the sacramental life of the Church and the locus of the *ecclesia*. All these questions present valuable opportunities for examining and developing the life and mission of the Church.

Going Back to the Roots: What Is Truly Essential?

In the face of these challenges and opportunities, pastoral workers would do well to resist the temptation of jumping too hastily into action as some contemporary secular leaders do. Instead, they can take a step back and become more mindful of making a good discernment of God's will. They could first identify the questions they feel called to address together with their communities, after attending to the signs of the times. As noted above, some common questions might include: How do we respond to Catholics who now prefer to continue with online Masses even after physical church gatherings are allowed? What role can local lay leaders play in building up the faith community? How can ecclesial life and mission be made more meaningful and fruitful in the new normal? In collaborating with others to rebuild society, what values should guide us and where should these values come from? What is the right balance between economic revival, health, social, and environmental needs?

These questions do not have easy and straightforward answers, and there are often conflicting views even within the Church. the process of discovering the answers requires pastoral workers and their communities to go deeper back to the roots of belief. At the heart of this search lies a fundamental question that has in fact been heard frequently in the pandemic: What is truly *essential*? In this regard, the Catholic faith has a wealth of wisdom in Scripture and the teaching tradition of the Church that can be brought to bear. Recent magisterial documents such as those from Vatican II on the nature and mission of the church as well as on the liturgy can be especially helpful. Pope Francis has also issued relevant and timely documents such as *Fratelli Tutti*, *Laudato Si'*, and a series of COVID-related messages compiled in *Life After the Pandemic*. At the same time, the Congregation for the Clergy has issued a document in June 2020 on *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church*, which can provide relevant insights specifically for parish life. In addition to teachings from the Catholic faith, other wisdom traditions can also be brought to bear, such as those from culture, other religions, and various disciplines. Whatever the resource, the important thing is that they are approached with the aim of discovering and assessing their underlying principles through appropriate and fruitful means. This includes seeking insights through hermeneutical approaches such as “the

three worlds of the text”² as well as contemplating them interiorly and bringing them into prayer.

The Importance of Dialogue

Potential insights from various sources then need to be brought into dialogue. The role of dialogue in discovering what is truly essential has always been evident in critical moments of the Church’s history, from the Council of Jerusalem as narrated in Acts 15 to the *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* of Vatican II. In this COVID time, communal dialogue is once again called for. Amidst a diversity of opinions and perspectives, pastoral workers and their communities need to discern what is ultimately true, good, and valuable in the eyes of God, the Source of all Truth and Love. What is essential and needs to be strengthened and preserved? What can be changed? How should each group respond to the current reality and to its demands, challenges, and opportunities? What is God’s call for the group? The method of Spiritual Conversation in the Ignatian tradition could be a helpful tool in this regard.³ Good dialogue is premised upon genuine openness, mutual respect, deep listening, and authentic speaking. It welcomes everyone to the table regardless of hierarchical position, age, roles and responsibilities, socio-economic background, gender, ethnicity, or ideology. A good process fosters greater empathy and understanding among members and enhances unity, solidarity, and collaboration over time. This serves as an important counter-witness in the present milieu where social division and polarization have been on the rise, sometimes exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. Genuine dialogue also enables a community to purify and develop its beliefs, worldview, and values.

Solidarity, unity, and insight on profound truths are ultimately graces and gifts from God and come most efficaciously with sincere discernment as one communal body. In tandem with their mutual listening and sharing, group members in communal discernment also exercise intellectual reasoning, along genuine attentiveness to the innermost movements of their hearts, where the deepest truths are often revealed. As *Gaudium et Spes* reminds us, “humans

2. See footnote 12 in Christina Kheng, “Critical Reflection and Pastoral Creativity: The Pilgrim Way of the People of God,” *Asia Pacific Mission Studies* 2, no. 2 (2020): 1–21.

3. A brief note on Spiritual Conversation is found in the article mentioned in the previous footnote.

plunge into the depths of reality whenever they enter into their own heart; God, who ‘probes the heart,’ awaits them there; there they discern their proper destiny beneath the eyes of God” (GS 14). Such insight into ultimate truth come to human persons not as isolated individuals but as a spiritually united and organic discerning body.

Developing the Response and Proceeding with Humility

The relevant foundational principles which the group has clarified are then applied to the questions at hand to illuminate the most appropriate responses. Often, there is no one right answer. What is important is that the community has come to a better appreciation of what is most essential and has endeavored to make a good discernment through the meaningful participation of all members, seeking God’s will with sincerity. The most resonant response for the matter at hand can be tried out, bearing in mind that more clarity would come along the way. In this regard, the group should also proceed in a synodal way during the implementation of actions, exercising creativity, flexibility, dialogue, and discernment. A new normal often implies proceeding through trial-and-error, not fearing failure but always ready to experiment, evaluate, discern, learn, innovate, and try again. If anything, the pandemic has highlighted the rightful dispositions of humility and adaptability in all humankind’s endeavors. It also calls for a recognition of humans’ vulnerability and of our dependence on God and one another.

Towards a Universal Dialogue

Increasingly, the Church needs to engage with others in society to address common issues. This is true especially for the COVID-19 pandemic as well as other complex challenges such as climate change, natural disasters, and socio-economic inequalities. No single entity has all the answers, and everyone needs to seek and learn together in collaboration. From a theological perspective, promoting partnerships in the wider society is also imperative to the Christian faith vision of the human family. Synodality thus applies not only to the Church but to the whole of humanity as well. In this regard, pastoral workers can explore more fruitful ways of engaging entities outside the ecclesial community, be they civic organizations, local neighborhood associations, other religions, business firms, NGOs, or government agencies. As highlighted above, the engagement

needs to avoid jumping too quickly from problem to action but should involve communal discernment, including a pivotal conversation to clarify what is ultimately true and good. Such conversations can bring the whole community to a higher level of collective wisdom in terms of its beliefs and values, and promote long-term positive cultural transformation. Thus in the dialogue, fundamental questions can be raised, such as: What is essential? Why? What comprises the human good? Why do we think so? What is our underlying worldview?

A key challenge is to find more universal concepts and terms with which to discuss profound realities that are traditionally associated with religious belief. These include the notions of God, salvation, sin, and eternal life. In an increasingly pluralistic and secular world, these religious notions do not easily find an acceptable place in public discourse. In fact, the very mention of them might even be misconstrued as proselytization. However, by paying attention to the language and narratives of diverse groups in society, including social, cultural, business, and government sectors, pastoral workers can become more aware of the intrinsic guiding principles which they espouse and which resonate with the Church's teachings, and the terms that are used for them. These typically include "the common good," "human dignity," "equality and justice for all," "universal flourishing," "solidarity," "promoting physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being," and in these Covid times, "building back sustainably." Such terms and their underlying principles can serve as helpful starting points for initiating a conversation about universal truth and values.

Thereafter, the conversation can be gradually deepened and broadened so that all parties are encouraged to discover more profound realities, including the transforming love of God. To this end, there are also ways to open up spaces within public discourse or help non-believers engage with the divine reality. For instance, many people would acknowledge the existence of a positive force of goodness in the world, or a *de facto* origin of life, or even an ultimate source of being and renewal. Persons who do not have any particular religious affiliation might also be able to identify experiences of being touched by transcendent love or being profoundly moved by something beyond themselves. By listening to the varied experiences of people, pastoral workers might gain expanded notions of God and be able to foster more collaborative discernment about ultimate realities, thus strengthening the foundations upon which to rebuild society. To this end, various forms of interior reflection and contemplation can be adapted and encouraged for people of diverse backgrounds so that they can reconnect

more deeply with their own experiences and become more aware of the divine life within them.

Conclusion

Good pastoral leadership is very much needed now in this time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such leadership comes not only from individuals in authority but even more from discerning communities, walking synodality with one another and with others in society, seeking the will of God. The global disruption caused by the pandemic can be a favorable time for re-examining ourselves. It certainly invites humanity to reclaim its vulnerability, interconnectedness, and need for God. At the same time, it promises new hope. The Church can highlight the reality of this hope, most of all by modelling a new way of proceeding that is truthful, inclusive, dialogical, and universal.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHRISTINA KHENG, a Singaporean, is the Coordinator of the Extension Program of the East Asian Pastoral Institute (EAPI), where she teaches pastoral leadership and management. She is also a planning consultant for the Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific. Christina has a Master of Public Administration degree from the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, USA, and a Ph.D. in Religion and Theology from the Australian Catholic University. Her research interests include interdisciplinary methods for Church-society dialogue.