

Consensus

Volume 42
Issue 2 *Living through COVID-19, looking
beyond COVID-19*

Article 4

7-25-2021

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Recommended Citation

Coorilos Nalunnakkal, Geevarghese (2021) ““Ecclesia” in an Age of Pandemics,” *Consensus*: Vol. 42 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol42/iss2/4>

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"Ecclesia" in an Age of Pandemics

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What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? (Mt. 16: 26, NIV)

We are indeed living through extraordinary times in an extraordinary world. The COVID-19 pandemic has quite literally shaken the world. These are times when faith is seeking not merely understanding but new pertinence as well. The "new normal" that we are trying to learn and adapt to, has ramifications for our faith, especially for our understanding of church and church life.

Slavoj Zizek's *Pandemic: COVID-19 Shakes the World*² reminds us that it would be a futile exercise to try and go back to "the old normal." That would be an attempt to descent into "global barbarism," Zizek argues. The challenge, instead, is for us to seek new ideals and new utopias. In theological terms, this would mean searching for fresh visions and articulations of the new heaven and the new earth, of the reign of God in ways that are meaningful in contemporary times. Not everyone might concur with the notion of a "new form of communism" that Zizek tries to propose, *albeit*, in ideological terms. However, his appeal for new forms of global solidarity and cooperation certainly has Biblical and theological echoes that we can relate with. The spirituality of the early church was essentially one of communion, of sharing and of justice (Acts 2:43). It was a community that was oriented towards the basic needs of people and not towards the greed of a minority elite. It is to this original orientation that the pandemic is challenging churches to return.

COVID-19 and Church

COVID-19 has raised serious questions about the relevance of contemporary institutional expressions of church and ecclesial life. Similarly, the pandemic has also taught us that a spirituality that is merely ritualistic and not oriented towards the basic material needs of people, especially the poor, is of little value. When Pope Gregory came to know that a person in his neighbourhood died of starvation, the Pontiff, out of guilt, chose not to celebrate the Holy Eucharist the following Sunday. This is the kind of spirituality that contemporary times require of us. The Biblical lesson that the Sabbath is meant for humanity and not *vice versa* (Mark 2:27) is reinforced by the pandemic.

Berdayevev had said, "My daily bread is a physical need for me but my neighbour's daily bread is my spiritual need." This is called "liturgy after liturgy" in Orthodox theology. Unfortunately, institutional churches have lost this sense of spirituality and have instead become servants of "mammon" ("ungod" as Sebastian Kappen puts it³) and worshippers of

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² Slavoj Zizek, *Pandemic: COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York: OR Books, 2020).

³ Fr. Sebastian Kappen, *Spirituality in the New Age of Re-colonization* (Bangalore: Visthar, 1995). It is believed to be Kappen's last work. Indian theologians refer to it as Kappen's Manifesto. In this, for the first time, he refers to the Christian God as Ungod.

“silver and gold.” In this sense, Churches today, by and large, can be likened to the status of the church in Laodeacia that the Book of Revelation presents to us, “You say, “I am rich, I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.” But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.” (Rev. 3:17 NIV).

The pandemic has challenged churches with all their huge church buildings, institutions and material wealth to do some soul searching and to re-invent themselves. After all, in the eschatological vision of the new heaven and new earth, there will not be any “temple” (Rev. 21:22). The challenge therefore for churches today is to de-institutionalize and transform themselves into an organic presence and a hospitable space of care and compassion.

Pandemic of fear versus love

One of the offshoots of COVID-19 is the alarming spread of fear, the fear of the virus and of course the fear of death. According to an Arabian fable, a pandemic was once travelling to Baghdad. On the way, it met a caravan and the head of the caravan stopped the pandemic and asked where it was heading to and for what purpose. It said that it was going to Baghdad and wanted to kill 5,000 people there. On its way back, it was stopped by the same caravan at the same spot and the head of the caravan asked the pandemic as to why it did not keep its word and killed 50,000 people instead of 5,000. The pandemic responded by saying that it had indeed kept its word and that it killed only 5,000 as promised. When it was asked as to who killed the rest, it said, “fear.”

This is true in the case of COVID-19 as well. As we know, the fear and anxiety about COVID-19 have already accounted for thousands of deaths worldwide. Even after the arrival of COVID-19 vaccines, the fear factor hasn't quite receded. How do we deal with fear and anxiety? The “vaccine” that the Bible prescribes for fear is love. “Perfect love casts out fear,” says the word of God (1 John 4:18 NIV). The virus, as we know, is infectious. Likewise, fear and anxiety are contagious as well. So should be love. There is no fear in perfect love. Therefore, the perfect way of combating fear is through tangible expressions of love in action which is justice. If love is a noun, justice is its verbal form. The Biblical-theological antonym of fear is not courage but love.

A perfect example of this blending of love and justice (*agape*) is encountered in the Genesis story of Abraham and Sara receiving and offering hospitality to the three aliens (Gen. 18). This is a classic case of *agape* being shared with the stranger, the other, the foreigner, the marginalized. When you receive the outcaste and the alienated, you receive the Triune God itself. One of the Greek words used for hospitality and love for the other is “*philoxenia*” and this is what Abraham and Sara offer here. The opposite of “*philoxenia*” is “*xenophobia*.” In a world marked and marred by fear and hatred (*xenophobia*) which is reinforced by the pandemic, what we need is a church that is open, just and inclusive. What is heartening in COVID-19 contexts is that many churches are rising to the occasion by offering their church premises and institutions for COVID-19 treatment centres, counselling centres and so on. Some have even used their church buildings to store groceries for free distribution.

Let me share with you an actual story that has emerged out of COVID-19 context in Kerala. Chellanam is a harbour area where thousands of fisher folk people live. Their lives have been terribly hit by floods and recently by COVID-19. There was a public appeal to send them food and other supplies and the response was overwhelming. It was found that one of the food packets that a family received had a 100 rupees (less than two US dollars) bill in it,

put in a zip lock bag. Later the media revealed that this particular lunch packet was prepared and sent by a poor fisher woman by the name Mary. Asked as to what made her do that, Mary responded by saying that she had 200 rupees with her on that day and thought of sharing half of it with another poor family affected by the disasters. She thought it might help that family to buy some tea and sugar for at least a couple of days. This should be the spirituality that churches should foster especially during times of pandemics.

COVID-19, a call for transformation

As Zizek argues, the "new normal" that we talk about during these pandemic-stricken days, needs to be perceived as a challenge to faith, as an opportunity to search for alternative and credible ways of being and becoming church today. According to Walter Brueggemann, the virus is a "summons to faith."⁴ The signs of the times are warnings about a world order that has been unjust, exploitative, and unsustainable for humanity in general and for the poorest of the poor and the environment in particular. Global capitalism as it stands today (Naomi Klein calls it "disaster capitalism") with its economic architecture and paradigms of development, has been one of the root causes of the pandemic. Climate change, itself a consequence of the capitalist/environmentally insensitive development models, also accounts for the arrival of new and deadly viruses such as COVID-19. Therefore, it is also a call to return to earth, to reclaim the original bond between humanity and nature. Images of priests and nuns engaged in agriculture during lockdown days are promising signs that bring hope to churches and the wider society. Church buildings that remain empty today due to COVID-19 restrictions is a lesson for the Church of Christ – that it is futile to invest in huge mansions and structures and that it is more sensible and theologically more relevant to reimagine church as an organic space where genuine communion among God, humanity and nature would be a possibility.

The pandemic has also managed to bring back the original notion of church as a "house fellowship." The earliest manifestations of the church were in the form of small gatherings in houses where worship and sharing of resources went hand in hand. The Greek term for house *oikos* is the root word for economy, ecology and ecumenism. Therefore, going back to the vision of "house churches" during these days of the pandemic should challenge us to reconstruct our economy, ecology and church relations in ways that are life-affirming, just and liberative.

Jesus Christ always took the side of the victims of exploitation and oppression. The early church was fundamentally a continuation of this Jesus movement, a movement of the marginalized communities. Option for the poor and identification with the margins were the guiding principles of the early church. As the marginalized and the poor are the ones who bear the real brunt of all kinds of calamities such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Churches ought to reclaim the original notion of the church as a Jesus movement. The pandemic has expanded the horizon of inequalities between the rich and the poor with new forms of divide such as the digital divide, vaccine injustice and so on. Churches as a Jesus movement have a responsibility (mission) to address these challenges and ensure justice and fairness.

Crises like COVID-19 are opportunities for us/churches to reform ourselves. God does not cause disasters, but when they do occur due to human sin (unjust and irresponsible

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Virus as Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a time of Loss, Grief, and Anxiety* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020).

behaviour) God chooses to speak through them, to reform humanity and to draw good out of evil. Let me conclude with an example from the early church. During the third century, the church went through severe persecution under the Roman Empire. It also had to go through the crisis caused by a pandemic, the plague. How the church responded to the plague crisis has enormous implications on how the church flourished during those days. When the healthy Romans fled the city out of fear, committed Christians chose to stay back to serve those affected by the pandemic, sometimes even at the cost of their own lives. This is drawing good out of evil. This is how churches can reinvent themselves as movements of Jesus; by being a presence that is healing, therapeutic, transforming and empowering in a world that is sick on many counts. For this to happen, though, churches today must shed much of their institutional structures; those of racism, casteism, sexism, clericalism, ritualism and corporatist styles of functioning. The pandemic offers churches an opportunity to reclaim their original identity as a people's movement, a Jesus movement of the margins. Put differently, this is an opportunity for churches to regain their souls.