

# Theology in a Post-Pandemic Age

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## Abstract

This essay is an attempt to explore the impact of the global Covid-19 pandemic on the Church and, in this context, to reflect on the question of how theology should be done in a post-pandemic age. It is divided into three parts: first, a reflection on the significance of the Covid-19 pandemic; secondly, a further reflection on the impact of the pandemic on the mission of the Church; and thirdly, an exploration into how theology should be undertaken in a post-pandemic age. It proposes that theology in a post-pandemic age should be done in HUMILITY, METAPHOR, SOLIDARITY, DIALOGUE, and with a view to MISSION. It is hoped that such a theology will shape and promote a Church whose mission will help build our world not on the basis of power, control, competition and the accumulation of wealth, but on tenderness, compassion, solidarity and the sharing of resources.

**Keywords:** Humility, Metaphor, Solidarity, Dialogue, Mission

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## Abstrak

Esai ini adalah upaya untuk mengeksplorasi dampak pandemi global Covid-19 terhadap Gereja dan, dalam konteks ini, untuk merenungkan pertanyaan tentang bagaimana seharusnya berteologi di zaman pasca-pandemi. Penulis membaginya dalam tiga bagian: pertama, refleksi tentang pentingnya pandemi Covid-19; kedua, refleksi lebih lanjut tentang dampak pandemi terhadap misi Gereja; dan ketiga, eksplorasi tentang bagaimana teologi harus dilakukan di era pasca-pandemi. Artikel ini mengusulkan bahwa teologi di zaman pasca-pandemi harus dilakukan dalam KERENDAHAN HATI, METAFORA, SOLIDARITAS, DIALOG, dan dengan pandangan MISI. Teologi semacam itu diharapkan akan membentuk dan memajukan Gereja yang misinya akan membantu membangun dunia kita bukan atas dasar kekuasaan, kendali, persaingan, dan akumulasi kekayaan, melainkan atas kelembutan hati, kasih sayang, solidaritas, dan berbagi sumber daya.

**Kata-kata kunci:** Kerendahan hati, Metafora, Solidaritas, Dialog, Misi

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## 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has been called a “global pandemic,” even if this term risks being a tautology, since the term “pandemic” already entails a “global reach” or an “all-embracing impact.” In any case, it is beyond doubt that

the Covid-19 pandemic has indeed had a “global impact”— global, not only in the quantitative sense of having affected practically all countries in the world, but also in the qualitative sense of having affected all areas of human life.

Indeed, I believe that the Covid-19 pandemic has forced the world to rethink the way we live life and the manner we do things in life. This is also true with our life and mission as the Church, and by implication, with theology or the task of “faith seeking understanding.” This essay is an attempt to explore the impact of this global pandemic on the Church and, in this context, to reflect on the question of how theology should be done in a post-pandemic age.

It is, therefore, divided into three parts: (1) first, a reflection on the significance of the Covid-19 pandemic; (2) secondly, a further reflection on the impact of the pandemic on the mission of the Church; and (3) thirdly, an exploration into how theology should be undertaken in a postpandemic age.

## 2. The Covid-19 Pandemic

Let me begin, then, with the significance of this global pandemic. For me, one of the profoundest reflections on the significance of this global pandemic was made by Pope Francis in the homily he gave before he imparted the extraordinary blessing “*Urbi et Orbi*” on March 27<sup>th</sup> 2020(Pope Francis, March 27, 2020). What he said then has now found a more systematic elaboration in his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* (FT). Allow me, however, to quote a portion of what the Pope said in his homily:

[This crisis] exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities.

In this world ... we have gone ahead at breakneck speed, feeling powerful and able to do anything. Greedy for profit, we let ourselves get caught up in things, and lured away by haste .... We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick.

In effect, Pope Francis seems to be saying that the pandemic has revealed to us our vulnerability, fragility and finiteness in a world where our human achievements have led us to think that we are powerful, capable of doing anything we want, in control of our lives—even to the extent of controlling the future of our world, and also often, controlling the lives and destinies of poor nations and vulnerable people.

Indeed, during the last decades, humanity has produced enormous progress and has reached great heights of achievement. We have orbited space. We

have sent men to the moon. We have invented the computer. We have interconnected people through the internet. We have explored the human genome. And so, we feel powerful and have forgotten that we are finite and limited, that we are merely creatures and not the Creator. We tend, even if only unconsciously, to replace God and oust him from his rightful place. And so, the pandemic is a reminder of our vulnerability, our finiteness, our smallness, our mortality.

In a certain sense, we have built our world on the basis of power, control, competition and the accumulation of wealth, resulting in the unmindful use and abuse of the earth's resources. It would seem, then, that the pandemic is a call to a different way of organizing our world and living our lives—that is, with greater awareness of our belonging to one another as sisters and brothers in the same human family, greater solidarity with the poor and the excluded, greater respect and care for the earth, and greater openness to God's will and recognition of God's sovereignty.

I believe it would be a mistake if we simply bracket off the experience of the pandemic, and then when all of this is over, simply go back to where we left off and continue with life as before. The challenge of the pandemic is for us never to bracket off this experience, archive it and file it away. Rather, we need to treasure this experience and allow it to shape the way we live life from hereon.

As Pope Francis puts it in *Fratelli Tutti*,

Today we can recognize that “we fed ourselves on dreams of splendour and grandeur, and ended up consuming distraction, insularity and solitude. We gorged ourselves on networking, and lost the taste of fraternity .... Prisoners of a virtual reality, we lost the taste and flavour of the truly real.” The pain, uncertainty and fear, and the realization of our own limitations, brought on by the pandemic have only made it all the more urgent that we rethink our styles of life, our relationships, the organization of our societies and, above all, the meaning of our existence (FT 33).

Shortly after the release of *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis wrote a book together with the British journalist, Austen Ivereigh, which is entitled *Let Us Dream: A Path to A Better Future*. In this book, Pope Francis says: “The question is whether you’re going to come through this crisis and if so, how. The basic rule of a crisis is that you don’t come out of it the same. If you get through it, you come out better or worse, but never the same.” (Pope Francis, 2021:4).

### 3. Mission in a Post-Pandemic World

I believe it is in this light that we need to rethink our life and mission as the Church. I believe mission in the post-Covid-19 world should be directed towards restoring and deepening the sense of universal fraternity. As Pope Francis puts it: “Fraternity is today our new frontier.” (Pope Francis, 2021: 82). Fraternity, in other words, is today’s missionary challenge. In his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, he says,

It is my desire that, in this our time, by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity. “No one can face life in isolation ... We need a community that supports and helps us, ... How important it is to dream together ... By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together.” Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home ... each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all ( FT 8).

In the book, *Let Us Dream*, he explains that

This is the time to restore an ethics of fraternity and solidarity, regenerating the bonds of trust and belonging. For what saves us is not an idea but an encounter. Only the face of another is capable of awakening the best of ourselves. In serving the people, we save ourselves (Pope Francis, 2021: 81).

And he adds:

Now is the time for ..., a new humanism that can harness this eruption of fraternity, to put an end to the globalization of indifference and the hyperinflation of the individual. We need to feel again that we need each other, that we have a responsibility for others, including for those not yet born and for those not yet deemed to be citizens (Pope Francis, 2021: 38).

Basing himself on a tradition of his religious congregation, the Society of Jesus, Pope Francis explains what fraternity means in the following words:

To dream of a different future we need to choose fraternity over individualism as our organizing principle. Fraternity, the sense of belonging to each other and to the whole of humanity, is the capacity to come together and work together against a shared horizon of possibility. In the Jesuit tradition we call this *unión de ánimos*, union of hearts and minds. It’s a unity that allows people to serve as a body despite differences of viewpoint, physical separation, and human ego. Such a union preserves and respects plurality, inviting all to contribute from their distinctiveness, as a community of brothers and sisters concerned for each other (Pope Francis, 2021: 53).

In other words, mission today must help build our world, not on the basis of power, competition, control and the amassing of wealth, but on tenderness, compassion, solidarity and the sharing of resources. This entails that mission today needs to pay more attention to a decided proclamation of and a genuine witnessing to God's Kingdom, which is God's promise of a world built on justice, peace, reconciliation and love.

Obviously, this requires a different way of doing mission, one that harmonizes with these fundamental characteristics of the God's Kingdom—thus, a way of doing mission that is less aggressive, less coercive, less destructive, and more respectful, more humble, more courteous. Perhaps the one word that captures all these characteristics of a different way of doing mission is “dialogue.” As Pope Francis puts it in *Fratelli Tutti*,

Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these things are summed up in the one word “dialogue.” If we want to encounter and help one another, we have to dialogue (FT 198).

And so, mission today needs to be done in dialogue. Mission in dialogue is a way of doing mission whereby the gospel message is not simply “parachuted” from outside, but is made to enter into dialogue with the culture of the people. As Pope John Paul II used to say, the gospel can never be imposed, but only proposed (see RM 39). Or as Pope Francis himself puts it, the joy of the gospel is better proclaimed not by imposition but by attraction (see EG 15).

And here lies the challenge to theology in a post-pandemic age—theology is called today to help shape and promote a Church that is perceived less as a bureaucratic institution, and more, in the words of Pope Francis, like a “field hospital” after a battle where the wounds of humanity may be bandaged, cured and healed (Pope Francis, 2015/02/05); in other words, a Church that is less an institution of power and more a community of service, so that in turn the Church may be an instrument for the creation of a world built not on the basis of power, competition, control and the amassing of wealth, but on tenderness, compassion, solidarity and the sharing of resources.

#### **4. Theology in a Post-Pandemic Church**

In this context, theology needs to be done in HUMILITY, METAPHOR, SOLIDARITY, DIALOGUE and with a view to the MISSION of the Church. A word on each of these characteristics.

#### 4.1 Humility

The knowledge attained by the study of theology can lead to a sense of power. As the saying attributed to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century English philosopher Francis Bacon puts it, “knowledge is power” or “*scientia potentia est*.” (García, 2021). Those trained in theology can feel a sense of superiority over the rest of the faithful; and, as a result, some are tempted to actually exercise power and control over others in the pastoral ministry and similar settings. There is even the temptation to control God himself, making God simply an object of study or investigation.

Pope Francis warns against this temptation in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (GE). He calls this the error of “contemporary Gnosticism” (see GE 35-46). Pope Francis says:

“Gnostics” judge others based on their ability to understand the complexity of certain doctrines. They think of the intellect as separate from the flesh ... locked up as they are in an encyclopedia of abstractions” (GE 37).

Gnosticism ... seeks to domesticate the mystery, whether the mystery of God and his grace, or the mystery of others’ lives” (GE 40).

When somebody has an answer for every question, it is a sign that they are not on the right road .... Someone who wants everything to be clear and sure presumes to control God’s transcendence (GE 41).

Doing theology in humility entails recognizing that God is the mystery that surrounds us. This does not mean that God cannot be known by human beings, but that God as such can never be fully grasped or completely understood or adequately figured out. As the eminent German Lutheran theologian, Rudolf Otto, once said: God is “*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*,” a mystery that is both terrifying and fascinating, a mystery that both repels and attracts (Otto, 1917). As “*mysterium fascinans*,” God can be known; but as “*mysterium tremendum*,” God can never be fully grasped.

And so, theology in a post-pandemic age needs to recover the tradition of “negative theology” or “apophatic theology”—that is, the tradition that acknowledges that “God is known correctly only when we deny that God can be known perfectly.” (Isidore of Seville, as quoted in Bevans, 2009: 11). As mystery, God is never the object of human knowledge but always remains the eternal subject. Although the “object” of our faith, God never ceases to be “subject.”

Rooted in the Bible (e.g., Ex 33; Is 45:15; Jn 1:18; 1 Cor 13:12), apophatic theology is a venerable tradition in Christian theology. For instance, St. Augustine says, “If you have understood God, then it is not God you have under-

stood.” (Augustine as quoted in Bevens, 2009: 11). Or as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it: “We cannot know what God is, but only what God is not.” (as quoted in Bevens, 2009: 11)<sup>14</sup> And as the story goes, toward the end of his life, St. Thomas Aquinas had a direct experience of God’s love. From that moment on, he stopped writing and called everything he had written “all straw.” (Bevens, 2009:11). The late medieval German mystic, Nicholas of Cusa, spoke of the best knowledge of God as “*docta ignorantia*” or “learned ignorance,” that is, knowing that we don’t know (Bevens, 2009: 11-12.).

Ultimately, apophatic theology requires humility—the humility that is entailed in approaching the mystery of God or the God of mystery.

## 4.2 Metaphor

It is perhaps more than just coincidental that the global Covid-19 pandemic should come upon us today, in the so-called “post-modern age.” It is said that the culture of the post-modern age is “image-driven” rather than “word-based.” (Sweet, 2000). The proliferation during the pandemic of livestreamed masses, of homilies and gospel reflections in cyberspace, of attempts at evangelization through the digital media only enhances the image-driven character of the culture of the postmodern age.

The modern age—the age previous to ours—was a “wordy” world. It was word-based. Its theologians tried to create an intellectual faith, placing reason and order at the heart of religion. Mystery and metaphor were banished as too fuzzy, too mystical, too illogical. The Christian story came to be told through “creeds” and “doctrines” rather than through “parables” and stories. Its bias was showing that faith in God is right and true—a faith that satisfies the mind.

On the other hand, the post-modern age is image-driven. Propositions are lost on post-modern ears. But metaphor post-moderns will hear, images they will see and understand. And so, theology in a post-pandemic age needs to employ a different language—mystagogic language, Pope Francis says (see EG 166), and not just discursive language, the language of mystery and not just the language of rationality, the idiom of signs and symbols and not just of ideas and concepts, the “*via pulchritudinis*” (or the way of beauty), again according to Pope Francis (see *Evangelii Gaudium* [EG]167) and not just the “*via rationis*” (or the way of reason). Theology in a postpandemic age needs to show that faith in God is not just right and true (a faith that answers questions of the mind), but that faith in God is joyful and beautiful (see EG 167) (a faith that responds to the longings of the heart).

Theology in a post-pandemic age needs to seek not just to understand the mystery of God, but to encounter the God of mystery. It needs to complement “*fides quaerens intellectum*” (faith seeking understanding) with “*fides quaerens sensum*” (faith seeking experience), to complement “*credo ut intelligam*” (I believe so that I may understand God) with “*credo ut sentiam*” (I believe so that I may encounter or experience God).

Indeed, discursive language is not the only way of doing theology (Bevans, 2009: 57-58). There are other ways of doing theology, like art, music, literature, architecture. The Italian poet Dante’s *Divine Comedy* can be rated as perhaps one of the most influential works in the history of theology. There’s hardly a eucharistic theology in the Middle Ages more sublime than Thomas Aquinas’ *Pange Lingua*. And what Mariology can match Michaelangelo’s *Pietà*? Or what eschatology is more powerful than his painting of the Last Judgement in the Sistine Chapel?

Theology in a post-pandemic age needs to recover metaphor as the language that reverences the God of mystery. In fact, metaphor is the one common language shared by all 6,500 languages of the world. Metaphors are more than just decorations. They are the most fundamental tools of thought. Human beings think in images, not in words (Sweet, 2000).

It is good to remember that the first Christian icon was a textless, wordless symbol – *ichthus*, or the fish, (iota, chi, theta, upsilon, sigma = for *Iesus Christos, Theos, Uios, Soter*). And we can similarly say, “In the beginning was the Word,” but the Word did not remain Word. In the fullness of time, the Word became IMAGE—Jesus of Nazareth, who is not just the Word or statement of the Father, but the image or icon of the Father.

### 4.3 *Solidarity*

In the past, the understanding was that theology was a purely intellectual endeavor reserved to the professional expert. So those who did theology were only those who had studied in the seminary or those who had obtained a degree in theological schools. The ordinary faithful were considered simply as passive recipients of the teachings of the theological expert.

This thinking has changed in recent years. Today it is now taken for granted that, as a reflection on one’s own faith, theology is an activity of every believer, of everyone who has faith. Indeed, one contemporary definition of theology is that it is the “process of bringing to speech one’s experience of God.” So any Christian can be a theologian. Whenever a believer

reflects on his or her faith, he or she is doing theology—whether in prayer or personal reflection, or in teaching the faith to one’s children, or in conversations with a friend about what one believes in, or in the pastoral ministry of catechesis and preaching. Here, of course, theology is done in a largely non-self-conscious way. Still, theology takes place whenever a believer struggles with his or her faith or tries to make sense of his or experience of God (McBrien, 1980: 26).

As the great Renaissance Dutch humanist Erasmus puts it: “All can be Christian, all can be devout, and I shall boldly add, all can be theologians.” (Quoted in Thompson, 1989: 68 as cited in Bevans, 2009:47). And so it is that St. Therese of Lisieux (St. Therese of the Child Jesus) has been declared a Doctor of the Church, that is, an official theologian of the Church, even if she had no formal education, no degree, no training in theology. So, people today talk about “theology at the grassroots,” insinuating that profound theological insights can come from simple and ordinary believers. The Nicaraguan theologian Ernesto Cardenal’s four-volume work entitled *The Gospel in Solentiname* is a testimony to the fact that people with little education, like the poor peasants on the island of Solentiname in Nicaragua, are able to achieve a penetrating understanding of Scripture which becomes an inspiration even to trained scholars (Cardenal cited in Bevans, 2009: 47). In the Philippines, Bishop Pablo Virgilio David of Kalookan, has co-authored a trilogy, entitled *The Gospel [of Hope, of Love, of Mercy] According to Juan/a*, (that is, according to the everyday Filipino/a), which is a reflection on how God’s mercy, love and hope in him is revealed in the life-stories of ordinary Filipino/as (David, 2016).

Theology in a post-pandemic age needs to be undertaken in solidarity with ordinary believers in local communities and base ecclesial communities. It needs to hear the voices at the grassroots so that it may become the voice of the voiceless. Theology in a post-pandemic age needs professional theologians who can act as “mid-wives” who help to give birth to a theology of the common people. Theology in a post-pandemic age needs to allow itself to be haunted by the cries of the suffering poor and the ailing earth. It needs to be critiqued and enriched by theology at the grassroots.

Indeed, the kind of theology that we have depends on who does the theologizing. For centuries, theology has been done by professional experts educated in centers of theology in the Western world. Often the theology that has resulted from this theologizing was a theology detached from the real life-concerns of ordinary people, particularly the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed.

Indeed, theology in a post-pandemic age needs humility not just in approaching the mystery of God, but also in seeking solidarity with the people of God.

#### **4.4 *Dialogue***

One of the important insights that has emerged from the development of theology in the recent past is the insight that every genuine theology is contextual theology (Bevans, 2009: 52-53; also Bevans, 2002). There is no such thing as “theology as such,” or “theology in general,” or “universal theology.” What was considered in the past as “universal theology” turns out to be merely one particular theology that was imposed on the entire Church. Every theology is shaped by its particular context, namely, the particular cultural perspective and specific social location of the theologian. And so, any theology produced by a theologian is contextual theology.

Indeed, contextualization or inculturation is now considered a theological imperative. For any genuine theology must seriously take into account not just the “experience of the past” as contained in Scripture and Tradition, but also the “experience of the present” as expressed in the so-called “signs of the times”—signs of the times which are to be discerned in one’s context. Contextualization then refers to the synthesis between faith and culture, a synthesis which, in the words of St. Pope John Paul II, is a demand not just of culture but also of faith. Pope John Paul II adds that “a faith that does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought through, not fully lived out.” (John Paul II, [June 28] 1982: 7 as cited in Bevans, 2009: 53).

Contexts, however, exert a double influence on the theologian. On the one hand, positively, they sharpen one’s perspective and acts as a lens through which one can see reality clearly in a particular way. On the other hand, negatively, contexts are also blinders that limit our vision of the whole of reality. For instance, my context as a Filipino gives me a lens through which I can see and appreciate the experience of Church of Filipinos. But, at the same time, my context as a Filipino puts blinders on me and prevents me from truly understanding the experience of Church of, say, PNG people. Because of this, theology cannot be done in isolation, but needs to be done in dialogue. A theologian needs to listen to other contexts, other cultures and social situations. As a Filipino theologian, I need to dialogue with other Asian theologians, with European theologians, with Liberation theologians, with Feminist theologians, etc. And beyond that, Christian theology needs as well

to be open to dialogue with Buddhist theology, Islamic theology, Jewish theology, Hindu theology, etc.

Thus, the challenge to theology in a post-pandemic age is to undertake theology never in isolation but always in dialogue. While one's theology needs to be done according to one's context, it nevertheless needs to dialogue with other contexts. Theology in a post-pandemic age needs to be carried out in global perspective. Only then can theology assist the Church in helping create a global community based on tenderness, compassion, solidarity and sharing.

#### **4.5 Mission**

Mission is the “mother of theology,” says the German Scripture scholar Martin Kähler. He adds that the first theology was a mission theology and the first Church history was a history of mission (Kähler, [1908] 1971: 189-190 and Hengel, 1983: 53 as cited in Bevans, 2009: 56).

Indeed, theology first emerged as a reflection on the Church's missionary activity. From the beginning, then, theology did not exist for its own sake, but was at the service of the evangelizing mission of the Church. However, this missionary character of theology was pushed to the margins with the legitimization of Christianity under Emperor Constantine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. Theology then turned in on itself and began to concern itself almost entirely with “knowledge of God and the things of God.” (Farley, 1983: 31, 77 as quoted in Bevans, 2009: 56).

It was only in the 1930's, with the emergence of the notion of mission as *Missio Dei* (God's mission) and of the Church's mission as a participation in God's mission, did mission return to be at the center of theology. Once again theology was regarded not as an end in itself, but at the service of mission. In light of this, theology needs always to be undertaken with a view to the mission of the Church. And that mission is fundamentally the mission of continuing Jesus' own mission of proclaiming and witnessing to the Kingdom of God. The Church therefore needs to embody the values of God's Kingdom, namely, justice, peace, reconciliation and love.

Theology in a post-pandemic age must make mission its center. It needs to assist the Church in being faithful to its mission of being the sacrament of the Kingdom of God. This is the challenge to theology in a post-pandemic age—that is, that it promote a Church that can help build a world based not on power, control, competition and the amassing of wealth, but on tenderness, compassion, solidarity and the sharing of resources.

## 5. Conclusion

And so, to sum up, HUMILITY, METAPHOR, SOLIDARITY, DIALOGUE, and MISSION—these, I believe, need to characterize theology in a post-pandemic age—humility before the God of mystery, metaphor which speaks to the post-modern world, solidarity with the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth, dialogue with “the other” in global perspective, and the mission of witnessing to God’s Kingdom.

With these characteristics, it is hoped that theology can help shape and promote a Church that is seen less as a powerful institution and more as a humble servant of humanity. With such a Church, it is further hoped that a transformation of the way our world is organized takes place: from power to tenderness, from control to compassion, from competition to solidarity, from the accumulation of wealth to the sharing of resources.

If this happens, then the suffering and death of so many people and the immense sacrifices of our heroic health workers will not be in vain. Then something good will come out of this global Covid-19 pandemic. For as the Apostle to the Gentiles assures us, “where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more” (see Rom 5:20).

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