

ASIAN
HORIZONS
Vol. 14, No. 3, September 2020
Pages: 713-735

RETHINKING HUMANITY'S PROGRESS IN LIGHT OF COVID-19

James F. Keenan, SJ♦
Boston College

Abstract

This article explores the present circumstances where we find ourselves astonished by our own inability to deal with the crisis more collectively and supportively. Through research data that highlights how inequity is driving the worst of this virus and then the oversight of major social commentators, we examine the present precarity of humanity, the need for greater solidarity and vulnerability, the danger of misinformation and scapegoating, and the call for the church to rearticulate its mission today. The article concludes reflecting on the evident confusion and distrust around the world and suggests that the way forward is to acknowledge our guilt for the inequities, our need for epistemic humility, and our pledge to recognize and accompany those most at risk.

Keywords: Covid-19; Inequity; Progress; Recognition; Vulnerability

This article is in three parts. First, together we reflect how novel an interruption COVID-19 is in our global lives. Second, we engage a number of significant texts from Italy, South Africa, the US, and Colombia that offer us an overview of what it means to be human in a time of COVID-19. Third, we return to the theme of vulnerability that I addressed in my last article for *Asian Horizons* and suggest that we acknowledge the evident guilt that underlies our confusion, that

♦James F. Keenan SJ is the Vice Provost for Global Engagement, Canisius Chair and Director of the Jesuit Institute at Boston College. As the founder of Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church (CTEWC), he chaired the international conferences in Padua (2006), Trento (2010) and Sarajevo (2018). Recently he wrote *University Ethics: How Colleges Can Build and Benefit from a Culture of Ethics* and has just published two edited books, *Building Bridges in Sarajevo: The Plenary Papers of Sarajevo 2018* and *Street Homelessness and Catholic Theological Ethics*. Email: james.keenan.2@bc.edu

we adopt an epistemic humility, that we begin the process of recognition and finally that we boldly accommodate those most vulnerable to the virus.

A Novel Interruption

In an article entitled, “Being Human in the Time of Covid-19,” the theologian Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, writes from Pretoria, South Africa, describing in part the novel situation in which we find ourselves. He writes that this is “the first time in the history of humanity that such drastic global lockdown measures have been taken and that governments have taken the conscious decisions to ‘lay lame’ (cripple) their economies. Such a radical decision is truly novel. Besides the economic ‘lockdown’, there are numerous socio-economic repercussions.” He proposes that “Covid-19 maybe challenges what being human means, or at least, what one has come to believe concerning the meaning of being human.”¹

It is hard to think of any recent event in the world since the Second World War that could prompt this question: what does being human mean? It sounds like something from a philosophy or a theology class. But the question has relevance today not only in the classroom but everywhere inasmuch as suddenly the basic ways that we have related to one another in the office, in the playground, in the classroom, in the bedroom, and even in the kitchen have been altered.

Not only has the context of our relationality been suspended, but the “normal” is no longer known. For we know that we will never go back to the normal. The handshake, the hug, and the kiss are not designed yet for the future.

More striking is that we do not have any sense of stability. We do not know when we will go back to work, when we will be in school, and when or how we will be at mass.

The Instability is Uncanny

More compelling is that Meylahn’s question about what being human means in these times resonates throughout the world. This is not a question for a part of the world where an earthquake or a tsunami have hit. In fact, some of the largest countries have been radically, that is, in their roots, affected by the virus: India, Brazil, the USA, Italy.

¹Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, “Being Human in the Time of COVID-19,” *HTS Theological Studies* 76, no.1 (2020) e1-e6, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6029>.

We are now asking fundamental questions in a way that we have never asked before, not at least, globally!

Besides entertaining what Meylahn calls the novelty of COVID-19 and its impact on what being human is, there is something even more provocative and disturbing and that concerns the question of human progress. Have we really progressed as well as we thought? Have we advanced as much as it seems we thought we had? These questions about how well we are doing are not as disturbing as the nearly terrifying question: Is the trajectory of our progress on track? This question lies behind a great deal of the uncertainty that we presently encounter, but it has greater impact on those for whom it has greatest effect. The question is particularly terrifying for those whose lives depend on the needed advances of human progress: the 60 million people in transit on our globe, those most unmoored by the catastrophic and yet worsening environmental events of the past forty years.

For decades we have been presuming that there has been human progress. Globalization has given us the impression that we are interconnected. Transportation and commerce coupled with travel and greater communication suggested that we were becoming a global community, even a global family. Advances in medicine, in particular in cancer, gave us assurances that we were moving ahead, though all the time we were ignoring the fact that illnesses like malaria and tuberculosis could be subdued but were not. We simply failed to recognize what we left undone. In similar ways, we have known now for years the harm that fossil fuels bring to our environment and knew that a sword of Damocles has hung not over our heads but over our children's heads and their children's heads, but still we persisted in the belief of human progress all the time, failing to bother to recognize that we have been compromising the future of our progeny.

Still, as Catholics especially we saw a church deeply tied to the agenda of human progress. More than fifty years ago, in a stellar encyclical called *Progressio Populorum*, Pope Paul VI promulgated the argument that human progress was constitutively tied to the development of peoples.² The Global South could not remain isolated, alienated, marginalized. The Industrialized North could not

²Pope Paul VI, *Progressio Populorum* (March 26, 1967) http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html. See a recent article, Giandomenico Mucci, "Papa Francesco e l'idea del Progresso," *Civiltà Cattolica* (August 1, 2020) <https://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articolo/papa-francesco-e-lidea-del-progresso/>.

proceed as if unrelated to the rest of humanity. We were and are deeply interdependent; our destinies are not separate but interwoven.

Any national progress was read through international lenses. A nation's development was not its own claim; rather, the international community through a host of architectonic networks assessed how we were all doing. We measured ourselves in terms of how we were related beyond our boundaries but even the very measure of our progress was outside those boundaries. Such was our spectacular love affair with our human progress.

But COVID-19 has interrupted human progress and has found us lacking. Though our interdependency is in evidence in terms of our vulnerability to the virus, it definitely has not been in evidence in terms of our responding to it.

Above all the interruption has laid bare astonishing inequities that completely compromise any understanding of human progress that we might have enjoyed.³ Inequities are everywhere. They are stunningly apparent in my country where racial, ethnic, class divisions are exposed by the way the virus attacks those most alienated from the common good of our society. Now those who were never able to harvest adequately our so-called common good are harvesting the virus.⁴ In America, COVID-19 has exposed our

³Mohamed Buheji, Katiane da Costa Cunha, Godfred Beka, B. Mavric, Y. L. de Souza, S. Souza da Costa Silva, Mohammed Hanafi, and T. Chetia Yein, "The Extent of Covid-19 Pandemic Socio-economic Impact on Global Poverty: A Global Integrative Multidisciplinary Review," *American Journal of Economics* 10, 4 (2020) 213-224, DOI: 10.5923/j.economics.20201004.02; Vicki Xafis, "'What Is Inconvenient for You Is Life-Saving for Me': How Health Inequities are Playing out During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Asian Bioethics Review* 12, 2 (2020) 223-34, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41649-020-00119-1>; Margaret Douglas, Srinivasa Vittal Katikireddi, Martin Taulbut, Martin McKee, and Gerry McCartney, "Mitigating the Wider Health Effects of Covid-19 Pandemic Response," *British Medical Journal* (Online) 369 (2020) m1557, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m1557>; Richard Cash and Vikram Patel, "Has COVID-19 Subverted Global Health?" *The Lancet* 395, 10238 (2020) 1687-1688, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31089-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31089-8); Neeraj Bhala, Gwenetta Curry, Adrian R. Martineau, Charles Agyemang, and Raj Bhopal, "Sharpening the Global Focus on Ethnicity and Race in the Time of COVID-19," *The Lancet* 395, 10238 (2020) 1673-1676, DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31102-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31102-8)

⁴Ravina Kullar, Jasmine R. Marcelin, Talia H. Swartz, Damani A. Piggott, Raul Macias Gil, Trini A. Mathew, and Tina Tan, "Racial Disparity of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in African American Communities," *The Journal of Infectious Diseases* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/infdis/jiaa372>; Shikha Garg, Lindsay Kim, Michael Whitaker, Alissá O'Halloran, Charisse Cummings, Rachel Holstein, Mila Prill, et al, "Hospitalization Rates and Characteristics of Patients Hospitalized with Laboratory-confirmed Coronavirus Disease 2019 – COVID-NET, 14 states, March 1-

shame.⁵ The shame is only in part connected to the President, Donald Trump.

Unfortunately, at a time when the world needs leadership, the US and Brazil have been major failures in addressing the global pandemic. Indeed, in a comparative study of governmental responses, the two presidents of these countries were signalled out for their extraordinary failure through their use of misinformation: "Presidents Trump in the United States and Bolsonaro in Brazil both adopted destructive denialist approaches to the epidemic, which undermined efforts to respond effectively."⁶ The reviews of Bolsonaro are not much different from those of Trump. One could say, the failure of one validates the failure of the other.⁷ And yet, those are not the only leaders who fail to recognize their responsibility to address the virus and in particular, those most at

30, 2020," *MMWR, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 69, 15 (2020) 458–64, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6915e3>, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6915e3.htm>; Christopher Peak, "Failing to Protect Black Lives: How Washington, D.C., Mishandled its Response to the Coronavirus," *APMreports*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.apmreports.org/story/2020/07/15/washington-dc-response-to-coronavirus>; Katherine J. Wu, "Study of Coronavirus in Pregnant Women Finds Striking Racial Differences," *New York Times*, July 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/10/health/coronavirus-race-pregnancy.html>; Reis Thebault, Andrew Ba Tran, and Vanessa Williams, "The Coronavirus is Infecting and Killing Black Americans at an Alarming High Rate," *Washington Post*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/07/coronavirus-is-infecting-killing-black-americans-an-alarmingly-high-rate-post-analysis-shows/>; Teresia Hinga provides a remarkable meditation on hand-washing in the Global North as opposed to the Global South in "Covid-19's WASH Factor - A Solution for the Syndemic?," *The First* (July 1, 2020), <https://catholicethics.com/forum/covid-19-wash-factor/>.

⁵Brendan Miller and Adam Westbrook, "'That's Ridiculous.' How America's Coronavirus Response Looks Abroad," *The New York Times*, July 27, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/27/opinion/covid-19-global-response.html>.

⁶Scott Greer, Elizabeth J. King, Elize Massard da Fonseca, and Andre Peralta-Santos, "The Comparative Politics of COVID-19: The Need to Understand Government Responses," *Global Public Health* (June 20, 2020) 1-4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2020.1783340>.

⁷Julie Ricard and Juliano Medeiros, "Using Misinformation as a Political Weapon: COVID-19 and Bolsonaro in Brazil," *The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* (April 17, 2020), <https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/using-misinformation-as-a-political-weapon-covid-19-and-bolsonaro-in-brazil/>; Francisco Ortega and Michael Orsini, "Governing COVID-19 without Government in Brazil: Ignorance, Neoliberal Authoritarianism, and the Collapse of Public Health Leadership," *Global Public Health* (July 14, 2020) 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2020.1795223>; Gabriela Lotta, Clare Wenham, João Nunes, and Denise Nacif Pimenta, "Community Health Workers Reveal COVID-19 Disaster in Brazil," *The Lancet* (July 10, 2020), [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)31521-X.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(20)31521-X.pdf).

risk to it. From Latin America,⁸ to India,⁹ to Africa,¹⁰ the nations are not responding to those most vulnerable and indeed their own national and regional situations worsen.

In fact, inequities are a cause of the spread of the virus, meaning that were our world not so marked by inequity, the virus would be more easily and effectively contained.¹¹

⁸Talha Burki, "COVID-19 in Latin America," *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* 20, 5 (2020) 547-548, DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099\(20\)30303-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(20)30303-0); Nina Mendez-Dominguez, Alberto Alvarez-Baeza, and Genny Carrillo, "Demographic and Health Indicators in Correlation to Interstate Variability of Incidence, Confirmation, Hospitalization, and Lethality in Mexico: Preliminary Analysis from Imported and Community Acquired Cases During COVID-19 Outbreak," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, 12 (2020) 4281, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17124281>.

⁹Human Rights Watch, "India: COVID-19 Lockdown Puts Poor at Risk," March 27, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/27/india-covid-19-lockdown-puts-poor-risk#>; Vikas Menon, Susanta Kumar Padhy, and Jigyansa Ipsita Pattnaik, "Stigma and Aggression Against Health Care Workers in India Amidst COVID-19 Times: Possible Drivers and Mitigation Strategies," *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine* (July 2020) 400-401, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0253717620929241>; Kishinchand Poornima and Ajnesh Prasad, "The Impossibility of Social Distancing among the Urban Poor: The Case of an Indian Slum in the Times of COVID-19," *Local Environment* 25, 5 (2020) 414-418, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2020.1754375>; Shakil Ahmed, M. Omar Khaium, and Fabeha Tazmeem, "COVID-19 Lockdown in India Triggers a Rapid Rise in Suicides due to the Alcohol Withdrawal Symptoms: Evidence from Media Reports," *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764020938809>; Karan Deep Singh and Jeffrey Gettleman, "India has 'Paid a Price for Laxity' in Fighting Virus—Many Cities and States Locking down again as New Infection Figures Hit Record Highs," *Irish Times* (Dublin, Ireland), July 20, 2020: 6, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/17C55461D9B669A8>; Madikay Senghore, Merveille K Savi, Bénédicte Gnanon, William P Hanage and Iruka N Okeke, "Leveraging Africa's Preparedness towards the Next Phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *The Lancet Global Health* 8, 7 (2020), e884-e885, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(20\)30234-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(20)30234-5); Akaninyene Otu, Bassey Ebenso, Ronald Labonte, and Sanni Yaya, "Tackling COVID-19: Can the African Continent Play the Long Game?" *Journal of Global Health* 10, 1 (2020), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7182683/>; Mohammad Karamouzian and Navid Madani, "COVID-19 Response in the Middle East and North Africa: Challenges and Paths Forward," *The Lancet Global Health* (July 2020), e886-e887, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(20\)30233-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(20)30233-3); Jerome Amir Singh, "COVID-19: Science and Global Health Governance under Attack," *SAMJ: South African Medical Journal* 110, 6 (2020) 1-2.

¹⁰Toshiko Kaneda and Lori S. Ashford, "Sub-Saharan Africa's Demographic and Health Characteristics Will Influence the Course of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *PRB Report* (June 10, 2020), <https://www.prb.org/sub-saharan-africas-demographic-and-health-characteristics-will-influence-the-course-of-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

¹¹Faheem Ahmed, Na'eem Ahmed, Christopher Pissarides, and Joseph Stiglitz, "Why Inequality could Spread COVID-19," *The Lancet Public Health* 5, 5 (2020), e240,

Witness, for instance, the lack of global interconnectedness in the pursuit of the vaccine. Instead of progressive interdependency and transparency, we find the great design of interdependency tattered outside the labs of research. Google “vaccinations” and you will quickly discover that the virus has impeded our own ability... universally... to vaccinate our children for childhood diseases.¹² Second to that, we find that world health officials are concerned about the overwhelmingly competitive as opposed to the cooperative search for a vaccine. Herein are concerns not only about who will find it first but who will be left last to access the vaccine.¹³ My own country shames itself again when our president pursues the vaccine with unethical abandon.¹⁴

The great interruption has revealed a great contradiction. It is not how far we have advanced but how far we have slid, not how far we progressed, but how much opportunity we have lost.

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(20\)30085-2/fulltext?utm_campaign=tlcoronavirus20utm_source=twitterutm_medium=social](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(20)30085-2/fulltext?utm_campaign=tlcoronavirus20utm_source=twitterutm_medium=social); Leighton Ku and Erin Brantley, “Widening Social and Health Inequalities During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *JAMA Health Forum* 1, 6, e200721-e200721, <https://jamanetwork.com/channels/health-forum/fullarticle/2767253>; Whitney N. Laster Pirtle, “Racial Capitalism: A Fundamental Cause of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic Inequities in the United States,” *Health Education & Behavior* (2020), doi: 10.1177/1090198120922942.

¹²Roxanne Nelson, “COVID-19 Disrupts Vaccine Delivery,” *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* 20, 5 (2020) 546, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099\(20\)30304-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(20)30304-2); “WHO and UNICEF Warn of a Decline in Vaccinations during COVID-19” 15 July 2020, <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/15-07-2020-who-and-unicef-warn-of-a-decline-in-vaccinations-during-covid-19>; Austin Horn, “U.N. Points to ‘Alarming Decline’ in Child Vaccinations.” *National Public Radio* (July 15, 2020), <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/07/15/891551846/u-n-points-to-alarming-decline-in-child-vaccinations>. About the US inefficiency in childhood vaccination programs, Jeanne M. Santoli, “Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Routine Pediatric Vaccine Ordering and Administration—United States, 2020,” *MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 69 (2020), <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6919e2.htm>.

¹³Gavin Yamey, Marco Schäferhoff, Richard Hatchett, Muhammad Pate, Feng Zhao, and Kaci Kennedy McDade, “Ensuring Global Access to COVID-19 Vaccines,” *The Lancet* 395, 10234 (2020) 1405-1406, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30763-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30763-7); “Global Governance for COVID-19 Vaccines,” *The Lancet (London, England)* 395, 10241 (2020) 1883, 10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31405-7; Ann Danaiya Usher, “COVID-19 Vaccines for all?” *The Lancet* 395, 10240 (June 2020) 1822-1823, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31354-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31354-4).

¹⁴Owen Dyer, “Covid-19: Trump Sought to Buy Vaccine Developer Exclusively for US, Say German Officials,” *BMJ: British Medical Journal (Online)* 368 (2020), DOI:10.1136/bmj.m1100; Stephanie Nebehay and Michael Shields, “World Leaders Launch Plan to Speed Covid-19 Drugs, Vaccine; U.S. Stays away,” *Reuters* April 24, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-who/world-leaders-to-launch-who-covid-19-plan-but-u-s-wont-take-part-idUSKCN2261M7>.

Here then let us consider the final contradiction: women in the pandemic. A recent essay informs us that a full 70% of global healthcare workers are women, but they only hold 25% of the senior positions among healthcare professions. In fact, they are universally chronically underpaid and are not adequately “covered” in their care for those infected by the virus.¹⁵ Gender equity a true marker for human progress is shamefully further away than ever.

Worse, women (and children) are now, in lockdown, more at risk and more victimized by violence and sexual assault than ever.¹⁶ Why are those most generous most at risk?

This accounting prompts us to face the question of this article.

Rethinking Human Progress in the Time of COVID-19

Above we heard from Meylahn in South Africa reflecting on the novel impact of the virus on humanity globally. Here I want to lead you through four other major claims and together develop a fuller picture of how we can rethink human progress. With each contribution a very particular advance in understanding ought to emerge and at the end all five pieces give us a mosaic, capturing I think the situation.

The philosopher, economist, and president of the Colombian Truth Commission now overseeing the reconciliation between the government and rebels of Colombia, Francisco De Roux, SJ, provides us with the second read on the situation in which we find ourselves. He emphasizes how surprising it is that we are so vulnerable and yet that vulnerability is not something to escape but to embrace. Here from a lengthier text I take some of his key observations.

¹⁵Inez Miyamoto, “COVID-19 Healthcare Workers: 70% are Women,” Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, (May 13, 2020) www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24863.

¹⁶UN Policy Brief: *The Impact of COVID-19 on Women* (April 9, 2020, <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406>); WHO, “COVID-19 and Violence against Women, What the Health Sector/System can do,” (29 April 29, 2020) <https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/vaw-covid-19/en/>; Jewel Gausman and Ana Langer, “Sex and Gender Disparities in the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Journal of Women’s Health* 29, 4 (2020) 465-466, <https://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.2020.8472>; N. Van Gelder, A. Peterman, A. Potts, M. O’Donnell, K. Thompson, N. Shah, and S. Oertelt-Prigione, “COVID-19: Reducing the Risk of Infection might Increase the Risk of Intimate Partner Violence,” *EClinicalMedicine* 21 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eclinm.2020.100348>. See also Sharon Bong, “New Normal, Old Gender Norms in the Time of Coronavirus,” *The First* (May 1, 2020), <https://catholicethics.com/forum/new-normal-old-gender-norms/>.

He first apprises the world before the interruption of COVID-19. He reminds us what "the powers that be" were thinking in January 2020:

We believed ourselves invincible. We were going to quadruple world production in the next three decades. In 2021, we would have the highest growth so far this century. We killed 2,000 species per year, flaunting our brutality. We had established as moral that good is everything that increases capital and bad is what decreases it, and governments and armies looked after money but not happiness.

It became normal for us to have the richest ten percent of the world, including in Colombia, keep 90 percent of income growth each year.

Then came the pandemic's interruption. He continues: "The coronavirus removed us from the illusion of being gods. We are confused and humiliated watching the real numbers of the infected and dead rise. And we don't know what to do."

We are definitely not ever secure.

He argues however that these lessons of our failures are actually keys to the future. He prescribes:

Living with the grandeur of vulnerability is living authentically, in solidarity and interdependence, because through it, we understand that we are all carried by each other, protected by each other.

Vulnerability leads us to include others without believing ourselves superior.

Vulnerability arrives so that governments understand what the State is. It is the only institution that we as citizens have to ensure conditions of dignity to all men and women equally, in good times and bad. That's what presidents and ministers are for, and the Police and Army, and the judges and Congress. All are vulnerable.

There, we need the determination to move forward in the knowledge of our own fragility. The need we have for each other. The meaning of authentic dignity, which exists only if its conditions are provided to everyone. The viability of what seemed impossible to us: generosity, solidarity and, beyond justice, reconciliation and forgiveness. The courage to live in a state of vulnerability.¹⁷

Vulnerability is a key response by many reflecting globally on both who we are today in light of the pandemic, that is, descriptively, and who we ought to be in light of the pandemic, that is, normatively. The answer to both questions is the same: vulnerable.

¹⁷Francisco De Roux, "We Believed Ourselves Invincible," *Colombia News*, (March 229, 2020) <https://www.amazonteam.org/we-believed-ourselves-invincible-francisco-de-roux/>

Because the word has a very complex function, we need to understand how people like De Roux are using the word “vulnerability.”

One of my favourite philosophers is Judith Butler who realized that we had a problem with identifying vulnerability as being in need. If being vulnerable meant being in need, then people who should respond to those in need, should be invulnerable, dominant, or anything but in need.

Butler insisted that vulnerability was not primarily about need but about the capacity to respond. Vulnerable people are able to hear the call of the other. Vulnerability is not first about weakness or neediness but about availability. This is precisely why people who suffer want to be accompanied by vulnerable people: they know that vulnerable people appreciate their predicament.

If we want to respond to the other in need, *we* have to be vulnerable.

In my last article in *Asian Horizons* I wrote a great deal about being vulnerable.¹⁸ Among other matters, there I noted a central obstacle to appreciating the meaning of being vulnerable, that is, we have to overcome a common misunderstanding of the word. Some believe that the word “vulnerable” means being or having been wounded. But that is not what the word means. To be vulnerable means to have the capacity to be wounded, to be exposed, at risk and responsive to the other.

This newer understanding of vulnerability helps us to reread the Good Samaritan parable, by asking who is the vulnerable one there: the wounded man or the Samaritan?

Before we start, let us remember that there is an overlooked trick in the parable. In answer to the question, who is my neighbour, we *begin* to think at the start that my neighbour is the wounded one on the road. Yet at the end we realize that the neighbour is the one who showed mercy. We think of neighbour first as an object of concern, but then realize it is the subject who responds.

Vulnerability appears to switch in the parable in much the same way that neighbour does. They function the same way: the vulnerable one lays on the road but he is passed by two invulnerable people, dominant in solving all the big problems of their day, yet unable to recognize the man they pass by. Only the Samaritan is

¹⁸James Keenan, “Vulnerability and Hierarchicalism,” *Asian Horizons* 14, 2 (2020) 319-332.

vulnerable to the wounded man. Only the Samaritan is capacious to recognize and respond to the wounded man.

In a memorable text, Butler describes being vulnerable as the foundational human capacity for being a neighbour. In an almost essentialist way, she writes:

You call upon me, and I answer. But if I answer, it was only because I was already answerable; that is, this susceptibility and vulnerability constitutes me at the most fundamental level and is there, we might say, prior to any deliberate decision to answer the call. In other words, one has to be already capable of receiving the call before actually answering it. In this sense, ethical responsibility presupposes ethical responsiveness.¹⁹

This notion of vulnerability then describes not only those at risk but more importantly the human condition. Butler is basically asserting that the two who passed by the wounded man, lost their vulnerability. The human challenge is to develop and hone our vulnerability. If we do not, we will lose our humanity.

In our third read the Italian/American theological ethicist, Andrea Vicini, develops further the issue of vulnerability as encountered in the time of COVID-19.²⁰ Entitled "Life in the Time of the Coronavirus," Vicini uses the deceptive ambiguities from Gabriel Márquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera* as a thematic.²¹ Vicini takes us further than De Roux to explore the very compromised situation in which we find ourselves. In particular, he considers how we try to differentiate ourselves from others rather than embrace our collective vulnerability. Vicini, a physician, notes: "We are all at risk... It is a solidarity that is neither sought after, nor wanted, but it is lived. In the common, unchosen path, in which the infection unites us, we accompany each other, even if only on an interior and spiritual level." Yet that is only part of the story. He adds:

Unfortunately, the opposite is also possible. By continuing to believe that we are different, special and better, we avoid recognizing our shared humanity, that we are sick of the same disease, with the anxiety and worry that accompany every effort to cope. Instead of finding ourselves together and close to each other in a suffering that makes no distinctions, it is separation that reigns ("we are not like them"), further isolating and compromising the possibilities of solidarity and support.

¹⁹Judith Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, 2 (2012) 134-151, at 142.

²⁰ Andrea Vicini, "Life in the Time of Coronavirus," March 30, 2020 *La Civiltà Cattolica* <https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/life-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>

²¹G.G. Márquez, *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*, Barcelona: Bruguera, 1985.

He explores these contradictories: “ethical commitment depends on uncertainty and knows impotence, but both of these demotivate, leaving people resigned and hopeless. Paradoxically, uncertainty and helplessness fuel ethical commitment, stimulate inventiveness, calling for greater competence in dealing with complex situations, seeking solutions that are not easy.” In precisely this world, the vulnerable respond to the vulnerable.

Effectively these are precarious times in which we live. Vicini captures the contemporary moment where following the insight that violence begets violence, we can add that uncertainty breeds more uncertainty and instability breeds instability. Vicini writes about the circle of confusion:

When there is a lack of certainties, in looking for them you risk augmenting them, either by creating an imaginary culprit, distracting from the real causes, or by generating fake conspiracies (claiming that the virus was intentionally produced in a laboratory), spreading false news, feeding stigma (blaming immigrants and minorities), generalizing (for example, proclaiming that all the inhabitants of the most populous nation in the world are infected), promoting the “therapeutic” approaches of dangerous charlatans, turning a global health emergency into a hunt for the enemy.

This confusion, if not recognized as such, is itself a breeding ground for vice. For instance, when faced with an inability to resolve the situation we want to blame the other, to make them the victim of our frustration. But, so as to avoid naming our own limits, we falsely accuse them of being the cause of our situation: we seek to resolve the uncertainty of the situation by clearly finding and blaming the scapegoat, again another fiction. Vicini captures well the scapegoat.

“The other,” the different, becomes responsible in an exclusive way. “We” are the victims. The opposition between “guilty” and “victim,” which echoes the oversimplified distinction between “bad” and “good”, so popular in films, has a falsely cathartic effect. Since the “others” are the cause of what we suffer, by eliminating and marginalizing them, we believe we can remove all evil from us, concentrating what is negative in them, in those we have turned into scapegoats and are ready to sacrifice for our own good.

For Trump it was the Chinese; for the Hindu extremists in India, the Muslims. Vicini adds:

The logic of the scapegoat shows how the human thirst for knowledge can be perverted, turning and reducing itself into a false attribution of guilt. In the suffering caused by the infection or illness that one shares, the possibility of renewed existential solidarity is supplanted by the emotional shortcut that identifies in the other, in those who are not like

me—be it for political, cultural, religious, racial, ethnic or linguistic reasons—the responsible and the guilty. The tragic irony of infectious diseases is that the one who is infected becomes the one who infects, showing the falsity of any simplification that aims at assigning blame to the other.

Lest we create and pursue the scapegoat we could heed the call to vulnerability, that we are all at risk. We could recognize that alienation is the work of the virus and of vice. Vicini notes: “Good ‘health’” is—at the same time and inseparably—a good that is personal and social, individual and collective, local and global. Collaborations and solidarity commitments, aimed at preventing, diagnosing and treating, are for the benefit of each and everyone. The common good of health is vulnerable and requires protection and vigilance. We cannot fail to take care of the health of others.”

Vicini helps us to see that in terms of the language of health, the way we understand the situation we live in matters. If we understand ourselves as connected then we understand that vulnerability and solidarity are the ways for combatting the virus as well as the underlying ethical pathologies like bigotry, bias, alienation and scapegoating. But Vicini also brings to us a recognition that in ambiguous times the way we think is compromised and epistemic practices are fraught with error leading us to not only misinformation but false attribution. No wonder that the world's most deleterious leaders use misinformation and fake news and in turn prompt us to distrust the truth.

Vicini shows us effectively that the truth leads us to solidarity and health and the lies lead us to alienation and death.

The precarity of our knowing, raised by Vicini, becomes central to another set of observations, this time from a bishop in the United States. In this fourth contribution, we are directing our eyes to the mission of the church to respond to this crisis. At the recent ordination of his new auxiliary bishop Ramón Bejarano, Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego offered in a noteworthy homily a remarkably hope-filled vision for a church not that aims at recovery but rather at transformation. Though aimed at the fundamentally immigrant diocese of San Diego, there is a great deal familiar, I think, in the homily that captures the rather existential tidal waves hitting all our shores.

In these observations this churchman brings to the church contemporary human experience and argues that the church's mission must radically adapt. He foresees first that on the parish level we stand to lose many irrevocably after the lockdown is lifted;

second, that present struggles on race, class, and caste reveal human progress to be a lie and that in fact human solidarity is at best fragile; and third, that humanity in its precarity lacks a sense of security needed to reply:

The pandemic has transformed the landscape of our ecclesial life in ways that will permanently change the nature of pastoral action and evangelization. Patterns of parish life that have sustained community and the proclamation of the Gospel for decades have been ruptured by the isolation of these months and the atomization of all social life that we have witnessed. There is a great danger that that pandemic is creating a culture of increased disengagement within the life of the Church that will persist long after a vaccination is found.

The issues of race and nationality, the rights of immigrants and the imperative for authentic solidarity in society and our Church that have surfaced in these past months are also a turning point, not an episode. We are in the midst of a profound social renewal in which the meaning of equality in our nation is in these days being irrevocably changed for the better.

Finally, and most profoundly, the pandemic has destroyed our individual and collective feelings of security on every level—personal health, financial security, safety, and relationships. We have come face to face with the existential reality that we are not in control and that the security we had treasured and presumed is an illusion.

He concludes:

Because of these three ruptures—the disruption of ecclesial life, the overpowering recognition that we do not live in a society of authentic solidarity, and the devastating assault that the pandemic has visited upon our false sense and sources of security—the pastoral mission... in the coming months and years must not be one of recovery, but of transformation.²²

With a doctorate in moral theology from the Gregorian and a PhD in political science from Stanford University, Bishop McElroy is a rather remarkable overseer of church life. For instance, after the two synods that led to the apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*,²³ he

²²Robert McElroy, Homily for Ordination of aux. Bishop Ramón Bejarano, July 14, 2020, <https://www.thesoutherncross.org/news/homily-for-ordination-of-aux-bishop-bejarano-our-mission-must-not-be-one-of-recovery-but-of-transformation/>; See Michael Sean Winters, "Bishop McElroy's Hopeful Vision for a Church Transformed," *National Catholic Reporter* July 20, 2020, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/distinctly-catholic/bishop-mcelroys-hopeful-vision-church-transformed>.

²³Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (March 19, 2016), https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.

hosted his own synod for young adults in his diocese: it was a model of church life in action not seen elsewhere in the United States.²⁴

The turn to the church is a significant one, calling bishops, theologians and other ministers to rethink human progress precisely in light of our precarity. He sees it as a time now to rethink and recreate our notion of church precisely because human self-understanding is shocked at coming to a new point where we do not seem to be as far ahead as we thought we were. In fact, it seems that we are lost and we are lost precisely in our standing with one another.

From Vicini and McElroy contradictions have emerged and for our final text we turn to the Pontifical Academy for Life which captured even more the contradictions we are experiencing in their statement "*Humana Communitas* in the Age of the Pandemic: Untimely Meditations on Life's Rebirth."

At its launch on July 20, 2020, its President, Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia provided, if you will, a summary of where we have arrived after reading these observations from around the world: "There has to be a recognition of the universal fragility of the human condition, a profound rethinking of humanity's purpose in the world and a concerted effort to rebuild models of coexistence, health care and development." He added: "We are all in the same storm, but not on the same boat," with many communities' resources and infrastructures being so fragile or lacking that these communities "sink more easily."²⁵

In the document, the Academy highlights the importance of recognition and argues for the "need to flesh out a concept of solidarity that extends beyond generic commitment to helping those who are suffering." They are not blind to the fact that: "The narrow mindedness of national self-interests has led many countries to vindicate for themselves a policy of independence and isolation from

²⁴Heather Morrison, "Millennials Make their Voices Heard at San Diego Diocese's Young Adult Synod," *National Catholic Reporter*, November 14, 2019, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/parish/millennials-make-their-voices-heard-san-diego-dioceses-young-adult-synod>.

²⁵Carol Glatz, "Not all in Same boat: Some Communities 'Sink more Easily,' Archbishop Says," *Catholic News Service*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2020/not-all-in-same-boatsome-communities-sink-more-easily-archbishop-says.cfm>; See "L'Humana Communitas nell'era della Pandemia. Riflessioni inattuali sulla rinascita della vita," *Nota della Pontificia Accademia per la Vita* July 22, 2020, <http://www.academyforlife.va/content/pav/it/the-academy/activity-academy/humana-communitas-in-the-age-of-pandemic-july-22-2020.html>.

the rest of the world, as if a pandemic could be faced without a coordinated global strategy.”

The language of vulnerability helps them to attain their insights into solidarity. Having reflected on the common good they write: “Common vulnerability calls for international cooperation as well, and the realization that a pandemic cannot be withstood without adequate medical infrastructure, accessible to everyone at the global level.”

For this reason, in the context of an ethics of risk, they argue that:

The articulation of solidarity as a principle of social ethics rests on the concrete reality of a personal presence in need, crying for recognition. Thus, the response required of us is not just a reaction based on sentimental notions of sympathy; it is the only adequate response to the dignity of the other summoning our attention, an ethical disposition premised on the rational apprehension of the intrinsic value of every human being.²⁶

This conclusion highlighting recognition calls for a new vigilance based on a vulnerability that is capacious. We need to recognize not only what we are learning about interconnectedness and solidarity but also that we so overlooked the inequities and alienating structures in our society that we conveniently gave ourselves credit for being some place that we were not. If we need to realize that this interruption is a new awakening not to our greatness but rather, as McElroy and Vicini suggest, to the greatness of the challenge before us: we are indeed in unfamiliar space because we have lost the sense of reading the signs of the times. We need a new vulnerable capacity to recognize human progress as it actually is.

How to Attain a New Vulnerable Capacity to Recognize the True Signs of the Times

Before we begin to articulate the steps we need as church to take in these precarious times, I wish to point out that the claims we saw above have been reported time and again around the globe by ethicists. From Peru, Apolos Landa agrees: “And now creation/nature sends us a virus that shows us how vulnerable we really are.”²⁷ In a

²⁶“*Humana Communitas* in the Age of the Pandemic: Untimely Meditations on Life’s Rebirth,” [20covid19.it/2022/07/luglio/testo%20pdf/HUMANA%20COMMUNITAS%20IN%20THE%20AGE%20OF%20PANDEMIC%20def%20ENG.pdf](https://www.20covid19.it/2022/07/luglio/testo%20pdf/HUMANA%20COMMUNITAS%20IN%20THE%20AGE%20OF%20PANDEMIC%20def%20ENG.pdf). The *Accademia* acknowledges the assistance of three ethicists in the writing of the statement: Roberto dell’Oro, Stefano Semplici, and Henk ten Have.

²⁷Apolos Landa, “The Real Hero and the Real Challenge in the COVID-19 Era,” *Christian Journal for Global Health* 7, 1 (2020) 30–32, doi:10.15566/cjgh.v7i1.383.

similar way, at the Alfonsianum in Rome, Rogério Gomes writes about the need for a new understanding of vulnerability in light of the virus.²⁸ From Africa, the Tanzanian Laurenti Magesa captures the precarity of our condition by meditating on the story of the calming of the storm at sea in the Gospel of Matthew (8:23-27). Offering an alternative disposition in the face of the disciples' panic, he suggests that Jesus admonishes them and us: "Why do you let fear overcome your hope? Is there nothing within you that you can rely on to face this menace? Am I not right here with you?"²⁹ From Kenya, Sr Anne Celestine Achieng Oyier Ondigo argues that there is much inequality that we need to grasp, that the philosophy of *Ubuntu* could help in articulating a new solidarity and concludes invoking a new recognition: "Recognizing and addressing the stark reality of inequality is essential for addressing the current and future pandemics."³⁰ From Malta, Carlo Calleja gives us a lesson from history about the vulnerability that emerged in the monasteries and confraternities that throughout history recognized and welcomed those with leprosy.³¹ Finally, from Japan, Osamu Takeuchi invites us to realize that we are being called to a metanoia, a conversion that prompts us to a recognition of our reality and of the reality of the poor.³² In short, other ethicists agree on the need to find a new self, a new relatedness, a new capacity to recognize reality as it actually is.

In this section I want to conclude on four points. First, I want to argue that the current experience of realizing how far we have fallen is an experience of a guilty conscience. Recognizing that guilt needs to be coupled with an epistemic humility, the second point. Here renewed we can develop as truly vulnerable people a new recognition and finally, able to recognize those we have long overlooked, we can accompany in a new solidarity.

²⁸Rogério Gomes, "Covid-19: Algunas lecciones de ética de un Virus...," *Studia Morale* 58, 1 (2020) 15-26.

²⁹ Laurenti Magesa, "An Alternate View of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *The First* (May 1, 2020), <https://catholicethics.com/forum/alternate-view-on-covid/>.

³⁰ Sr Anne Celestine Achieng Oyier Ondigo, "Inequality, Covid-19, and Humanitarian "Ubuntu," *The First* (June 1, 2020), <https://catholicethics.com/forum/inequality-covid-19/>

³¹ Carlo Calleja, "Lessons from the Past: Renewing Solidarity during the Current Pandemic," *La Croix* (April 16, 2020), <https://international.la-croix.com/news/ethics/lessons-from-the-past-renewing-solidarity-during-the-current-pandemic/12189>.

³²Osamu Takeuchi, "What Message is COVID-19 Sending us," *The First* (June 1, 2020), <https://catholicethics.com/forum/what-message-is-covid-19-sending-us/>.

When we turn to the history of conscience in western thought,³³ we discover that from Democritus on, conscience has a singular feature: it judges. In fact, most often conscience disturbs as it judges. Though Cicero's own conscience judged him well, in most of ancient philosophy the function of conscience is to distress us over our wrongdoing.

The Greek notion of conscience is found always as judge and it does not dwell well in anyone when evil is done: it awakens the wrongdoer with pangs. Conscience forces us to recognize our own misdeeds. In that rude awakening, many encounter conscience for the first time. To have a conscience is to recognize one's own guilt.

The birth of conscience through remorse is a common theme throughout Roman philosophy as well. Cicero, Julius Caesar, and Quintilian refer us to the ways conscience awakens us to recognize our own misdeeds. In his *Conscience: A Very Short Introduction*, Paul Strom remarks that this idea of conscience was so evident that in the very popular rhetorical work from the first century, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, prosecutors were advised to look and see whether their adversary's client shows "signs of conscience:" "blushed, grown pale, stammered, spoken inconsistently, displayed uncertainty, compromised himself."³⁴ To have a conscience is to recognize one's own guilt.

A guilty conscience is precisely one that recognizes a disconnect between what we thought was acceptable and the guilt we feel afterwards. Its pangs not only awaken us to our misdeeds, they awaken us to conscience itself and the ability in conscience to recognize what needs to be done.

When we are awakened, we suddenly realize that we have within us a moral sense that does not like to be disturbed. By these pangs we begin to realize that we carry within ourselves a moral beacon that troubles us when we are wrong and validates us when we are right. That is what ancient Western philosophy gives us: the birth of conscience, the experience of a voice that we can hear. Conscience becomes a new form of understanding and a new form of listening to the truth.

I believe that one reason why conscience is so pathetically ineffective in my country is that it was so effectively damaged by our

³³ James F. Keenan, "Examining Conscience: Ancient Wisdom on Judgment, Justice, and the Heart," *America* 214, 11 (April 4-11, 2016) 15-17.

³⁴ Paul Strom, *Conscience: A Very Short Introduction*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 6.

history of slavery and our national wilfulness to accommodate oppressive racism, that until we own up to that history, our collective conscience remains dormant at best. Of course, the complacency of the American conscience is rooted in the manifest destiny of the United States that moved native Americans toward extinction, a move that made the turn to slavery easier. But that turn to slavery so corrupted the Christian conscience that it was left without its capacity for courageous vigilance, hospitable solidarity, and honest sense of remorse. With diminished capacity the Christian conscience has accommodated a racism that now engenders a paralysis as we face the crisis of COVID-19. We cannot tell right from wrong; as a nation, we are crippled.

I take this turn to examining the American conscience, here, not because we are the only nation that has sinned. Rather, I do this here in *Asian Horizons*, so that as I think on our national guilt, you may think on yours.³⁵

The African American, theological ethicist, Bryan Massingale noted: "What, then, can free us from culturally induced blindness? If conscience is responsible to the truth, and the culture of racism blinds those who belong to the socially advantaged and privileged groups to a full awareness of moral wrongs/harms, what needs to happen for conscience to overcome such an ethical handicap?"³⁶

It is said that racism is the original sin of the United States.³⁷ Before Trump, the American conscience, unable to confess its guilt, was trapped in racist sin;³⁸ now, it is safe to say that that racist sin helped

³⁵I have written on the problem of the American guilty conscience before, "The Arrested Development of the American Conscience," *America*, January 2, 2017, <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2016/12/22/arrested-development-american-conscience>; "Collective Conscience and Collective Guilt," Christoph Böttigheimer und René Dausner, ed., *VATICANUM 21 Erschließung und bleibende Aufgaben des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils für Theologie und Kirche im 21. Jahrhundert*, Freiburg: Herder, 2016, 78-86.

³⁶Bryan N. Massingale, "Conscience Formation and the Challenge of Unconscious Racism/Racial Bias," *Conscience in Catholicism: Rights, Responsibilities, and Institutional Policies*, a conference held at Santa Clara University, September 10-12, 2014. Massingale answered the question in "Conscience Formation and the Challenge of Unconscious Racism/Racial Bias," David E. DeCosse and Kristin E. Heyer, ed., *Conscience in Catholicism: Rights, Responsibilities, and Institutional Policies*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2015, 53-68.

³⁷Jim Wallis, *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America*, Ada, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2016.

³⁸On America's original sin of racism, President Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at Commemoration of the 150th Anniversary of the 13th Amendment," *The White House* (October 12, 2015), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press->

get Trump elected. With the American conscience having hitched its hope on authoritarian and incompetent leadership, what are we to do?

A conscience riddled with guilt cannot function in anything but denial and darkness. We must confess our sinfulness and ask God to take away our guilt.

When we awaken to this sin of ours, we will awaken to conscience and when we do, a second insight will arise and that is that conscience is not only the source of moral responsibility for a person but also for a society. Societies discover their collective conscience when they acknowledge their guilt and when they appropriate humility. At that moment they become a society capable of true solidarity, a society capable of exercising its conscience.³⁹

For now, we see in the US a deep divide, a profound lack of solidarity along with a trenchant xenophobia. I do not believe that we can as a country move forward until we are reconciled collectively to our past. And that will mean acknowledging our guilt. The call to recognize Black Lives Matter in the middle of a pandemic is a call to recognize the original sin of the US.

When a conscience acknowledges its guilt, it becomes capable of developing its capacity by the epistemic virtue of humility, as Lisa Fullam calls it, a virtue integral to conscience formation.⁴⁰ This virtue is animated by what Margaret Farley calls the grace of self-doubt.⁴¹ Together they help us to see that the work of realizing ourselves as disciples of Christ is a formidable life-long task fraught with misperceptions and yet possible precisely because of that humility. Certainly, conscience does not us make us infallible; quite the contrary, as *Gaudium et Spes* reminds us, we frequently err. But we cannot get to the truth except through conscience. Humility then is constitutive of the Christian quest for moral truth, but humility can be acquired only when conscience admits its guilt.

Farley describes the grace of self-doubt as an “epistemic humility, the basic condition for communal as well as individual moral

office/2015/12/09/remarks-president-commemoration-150th-anniversary-13th-amendment.

³⁹Meghan J. Clark, *The Vision of Catholic Social Thought: The Virtue of Solidarity and the Praxis of Human Rights*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014.

⁴⁰Lisa Fullam, *The Virtue of Humility*, Lewiston: Edwin Mellin Press, 2009.

⁴¹Margaret Farley, “Ethics, Ecclesiology, and the Grace of Self-Doubt,” James J. Walter, Timothy E. O’Connell, and Thomas A. Shannon, ed., *A Call to Fidelity*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002, 55-77.

discernment.”⁴² Farley is concerned that often people become unquestionably self-reliant and self-assured. The grace of self-doubt is not, however, some hyper-active neurotic stance that questions every fundamental conviction we hold. Rather, she writes:

it is a grace for recognizing the contingencies of moral knowledge when we stretch toward the particular and the concrete. It allows us to listen to the experience of others, take seriously reasons that are alternative to our own, rethink our own last word. It assumes a shared search for moral insight, and it promotes (though it does not guarantee) a shared conviction in the end.⁴³

Allowing us to throw off the “albatross of certitude,” this form of humility helps us to enter into discourse respectfully rather than to tower above it.⁴⁴ By relinquishing the power of certitude it discovers a new authority, an authority in which the admission of ignorance might actually be a way to truth. The grace of self-doubt, like epistemic humility, is fundamentally a more vulnerable form of moral reasoning.⁴⁵

Recognition depends on vulnerability. We cannot recognize the other unless we are vulnerable: think of the “inability” of the priest and the Levite who “overlook” the wounded man in the Good Samaritan parable. The lack of vulnerability means that there is no capacity to recognize.

Jesus’ parables are often about recognition. The rich man never recognized Lazarus even as he stepped over him. Matthew’s damned, confounded goats never recognized the hungry, thirsty, sick or imprisoned. Like the goats, the challenge for people of privilege is to recognize those who are not.

Yet, recognition is the first response of vulnerable people.

In the United States, we are learning now to recognize that Black Lives Matter; the campaign is a call to recognition, a wake-up call to America that it has too long *overlooked* racial inequities in health care, education, and in the arts; racial profiling, excessive force, and mass incarceration by law enforcement; and the overall accommodation of white supremacy in our culture.

In India, people too have overlooked many, both socially and personally. The Dalit is not seen, nor considered. And through caste

⁴²Farley, “Ethics, Ecclesiology, and the Grace of Self-Doubt,” 69.

⁴³Farley, “Ethics, Ecclesiology, and the Grace of Self-Doubt,” 69.

⁴⁴Farley, “Ethics, Ecclesiology, and the Grace of Self-Doubt,” 60.

⁴⁵ See also, Klaus Demmer, *Selbstaufklärung Theologischer Ethik*, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2014.

one looks above but not below. Overlooking, like in the States, is a social practice.

In the States we have begun recognizing the names of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Trayvon Martin, Rodney King, Emmet Till, and so many more victims of American racism. We need to engage in a corrective practice of overlooking by engaging in deliberate recognition. That recognition helps us to grow in vulnerability. The two go hand in hand.

The parable of the Prodigal Son highlights how they do. The father is the vulnerable one who recognizes his son in the distance, rushes to him, embraces him, and welcomes him, thus beginning the process of accompaniment.

The story continues. The vulnerable father knows that as soon as he runs toward his younger son he triggers the resentment of his privileged son. But the father is vulnerable to both and wants the older one to learn recognition. The older son says "that son of yours," but the father responds "your brother was dead..." The end of that parable leaves us with the challenges of accompaniment. Accompanying those on the margins triggers resentment from the privileged. Being vulnerable means responding to both.

Think of the man born blind. He is healed and the leaders of the people are unsettled. Accompanying the one on the margins triggers a lot of repercussions. Responding to the one on the margins provokes.

Often enough we are held hostage by the possibility of encountering the wrath of resentment. Unlike the father, we do not run to respond; we do not want to unsettle the privileged, the supremacists, the relatives, the community, the caste. We might be vulnerable, we might even recognize, but we hesitate to accompany because we are harnessed by the expected repercussions.

Still, these three steps are the stuff of following Christ to be vulnerable, to recognize as neighbour, and to accompany the other. Deeply interconnected we grow in one as we grow in the others.

That third step, however, is not simply to accompany the marginalized. It also involves the responsibility to help the ones perplexed by what we do. Like the prodigal father we cannot let the older one walk away. "Son," he calls the elder one. Vulnerable to the son in need, the father remains vulnerable to the one unsettled. Like him, we cannot simply walk away from those who do not recognize.

Still, though we have to respond to both, we need to remember that the father did not hesitate to accompany the precarious son whom he recognized on the horizon and that's the step assuredly we cannot miss.

A final word. When we finally begin to confess our guilt, assume our vulnerability by humbly recognizing and accompanying our neighbour, only then will we begin to see rightly the goals we need to set for human progress. When we begin that accompaniment, assuredly by acting mercifully as the Samaritan did, by entering into the chaos of another, then we will begin to see how much our world is shaped by structural injustice and how much it humiliates those whom we accompany.

In a way, COVID-19 by exposing the evil of inequities is just giving us a glimpse of what is wrong with the world. When we begin to see aright, we will begin to see the world as it is experienced by many whom we do yet recognize.⁴⁶

⁴⁶I want to thank Lindsay Marcellus for her assistance in this essay especially for her reaching, selecting and gathering many of the resources I read for the writing of this essay.