

ASIAN
HORIZONS

Special Issue 1, January 2022

Pages: 101-114

COVID 19 & THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH: THEOLOGICAL-ETHICAL CHALLENGES

Sahayaraj Stanley, SJ♦

Abstract

Covid 19 was a game-changer in many ways. The life of the Church underwent tectonic shifts because of the challenges this pandemic posed. The Church as the body of Christ faced a real faith crisis. The fear of death loomed large and the very proximity of a human person became suspicious. We became prisoners of virtual reality but at the same time, we were forced to find God more in the digital space. Many of the faithful were glad to embrace the God of the gigabytes who quenched their spiritual thirst with voluminous online and offline reservoirs. The human person was forced to deal with the catastrophes of his own making and the global community became one in understanding the power of nature. The pandemic brought out the good Samaritan in all of us and the dedicated services of our healthcare personnel were lauded beyond measures. Though the fault lines of humanity are exposed, it is also time that we come together to work more in solidarity.

Keywords: Digital Media; Death; Deus Absconditus; Eco System; Eucharist; Healthcare Mission; Human Family; Quarantine; Solidarity; Pandemic; Vaccines

Introduction

*April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing*

♦**Sahayaraj Stanley, SJ**, Sahayaraj Stanley SJ is a Jesuit, belonging to the Jesuit Madurai Province. He did his licentiate in Alfonsiana, Rome, and completed his doctorate at the Leopold Franz University in Innsbruck, Austria. He is teaching at Arulkadal, the Jesuit Formation Centre for Theology in Chennai. Globalization, leadership studies, and Ignatian spirituality are among his areas of interest. Email: sahayraj@gmail.com

*Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.*¹

These are the opening lines of T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land." Interestingly, this first section of this long poem begins with the title "The Burial of the Dead." Corona virus has not yet finished its visitation of the world. For many, especially for the poor, not only April, but these last two years have become cruel and we are yet to sing and dance! We all yearn for the celebration of life, specially the Catholic Church. One shudders to think specially about the Holy Week in the year 2020 with suspended Masses and closed churches that was unprecedented and very exceptional.

The time of pandemic is a time of retrospection and reflection. This article briefly analyses the situation of the Church during this catastrophe. Some encounters and some dangers are discussed and some lessons learnt during this crisis are also presented. This author discusses nine challenges that are threatening the Church and its faithful in the near future.

1. The Life of The Church in Quarantine

The epidemics have a long history, but this time, Covid 19 knocked our doors with a ferocious appetite in spite of our modern medical facilities. Many precious lives have been lost and the entire Church has now, to a great extent experienced both the promises and perils of this pandemic. Though the Church was in quarantine, one can say that it has learnt to face the tough challenge in its own unique way! Let us examine some avenues.

1.1. Ecclesia and the Perils of Exposure

The body of the faithful (*Ecclesia*) is facing the dangers of exposure today. Though normalcy is limping back, the average believer has not yet ventured out for worship. Restrictions and lockdowns have become part and parcel of our life. Churches are slowly getting reopened and services are getting resumed only to be closed again for a definite/indefinite time.

The fear of uncertainty and ambiguity looms large specially in the faith realm. One of the ironies is, the assembly of the faithful is forced to adhere to 'social distancing'. Some authors point out that it is not 'social' distancing but rather, 'human distancing.'² The Latin root

¹T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ed, Michael North, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, 5.

²Saba Aziz, "Why 'Physical Distancing' is Better than 'Social Distancing,'" in Al Jazeera, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/30/why-physical-distancing-is->

word of 'congregation', which is 'greg' that means 'flock' or the Latin 'congregare' meaning 'gathering together' has become quite ironic! We are coming for a communal celebration but are forced to sit apart! For, a simple sneezing or a mild cough is heard as gunshots and the 'sneezer' is looked down upon as a bio-terrorist straight from the sleeper cell of ISIS!

One of the beloved concepts of moral theologians is "*Imago Dei*." Today the Covid situation has turned us to be practitioners of the notorious Hobbesian "*Homo Homini Lupus*"... (each man is a wolf to the other). There is the 'fear of the 'other' and the 'face' of the 'other' invites not compassion and mercy but suspicion, fear and anxiety.³

1.2. Deus Absconditus

The thesis *Deus Absconditus* talks about the hidden nature of God. In Isaiah we read, "*Truly You are God, who hide Yourself, O God of Israel, the Savior!*" (Isa 45:15). We read that in the Cross of Jesus, divinity hid itself. This provoking statement is closely linked to theodicy.

Moltmann writes that the Israelite understanding of the '*pathos*' of God is something very unique.⁴ The God of the Covenant is injured and heartbroken whenever the chosen people disobeyed him and went astray. The great love that God had towards his people also led him towards great self-humiliations.⁵ Moltmann explains and connects this self-humiliation of God with the theology of the Cross.

Moltmann re-narrates a terrifying story from Elie Wiesel's account in the Nazi death camp....

The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour. "Where is God? Where is he?" someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment, I heard the man call again, "Where is God now?" And I heard a voice in myself answer: "Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows"

Moltmann further writes,

better-than-social-distancing, 30 March 2020, accessed on 15th July 2021. This 'human distancing' can be seen as the distancing of relationships as well as the physical distance that is forced in the community.

³Here, one can think of the concept of "Face of the other"—expounded by Emmanuel Levinas.

⁴'Pathos' is a quality that evokes pity and sadness. In the understanding of Moltmann, the Hebrew God is full of pathos—that is, the Hebrew God suffers when humanity suffers.

⁵Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God, The Cross of Christ as The Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, 270–274.

Any other answer would be blasphemy. There cannot be any other Christian answers to the question of this torment. To speak here of a God who could not suffer would make God a demon. To speak here of an absolute God would make God an annihilating nothingness. To speak here of an indifferent God would condemn men to indifference.⁶

Whenever we see wars, catastrophes or unexplainable suffering, we attribute them, to the absence of God. Matured theologians and people of faith, might understand the problem of suffering from the standpoint of 'faith' and 'mystery'. But for ordinary folks, the suffering and agonies are times of running away from a cruel, callous God.

The point here is, that God suffers, whenever the human person suffers. This is also to say that the plight, agony as well as ecstasy of humans are intrinsically and inherently connected with God. Conceivably, in the absence of God, what is required is a strong, human presence that is full of empathy. After all, we are His own proxies!

1.3. Fear of Death – Loss of Accompaniment & Shadow Burials

*Death lays his icy hand on kings:
Sceptre and Crown – Must tumble down,
And in the dust be equal made*

The above lines are from '*Death the Leveller*,' a famous poem by James Shirley, a sixteenth-century English dramatist. The Corona pandemic has once again demonstrated, that the victim and the victor—both have to bite the dust when God takes the call. While death is a great leveller, it is also true that no one wants to die! We all want to live and the Church stands by Jesus the protector and sustainer of life! One can see umpteen number of examples for Jesus the Life-giver.

In the first part of the Johannine account, all the miracles in the Book of Signs, numbering seven, stand and speak for 'life'. The Church accompanies the believer in the 'lifegiving' faith journey. This 'faith' in 'life' is threatened by the lurking danger of death, transported by the Coronavirus. Because of the pandemic, today there is no human accompaniment in the life of a Covid patient. Worse still, we are repeatedly asked by the government and health professionals to avoid close contact. There is no accompaniment in life as well as in death! – with the fear of contagion and infection.

⁶Moltmann, *The Crucified God*. Since these are quotations, could you please give the exact page number/s?

Because of Covid 19, in India, it is reported that among the thousands who died, 170 were Catholic priests and 116 were women religious.⁷ One can remember the plight of all these people who were given a shadow burial! The same was painfully true of healthcare professionals who journeyed with patients all through their life and for priests who lived their entire lives for their parishioners. Their death was despised! Because we want to live!

1.4. Eucharist in Exile

One of the most difficult and painful factors that the faithful and clergy are facing is the celebration of the Eucharist in the online mode. Even where Eucharistic celebrations are allowed, people are advised to maintain a safe distance and the congregation looks dull and dreary. In his encyclical letter, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, St John Paul II wrote that the church draws her life from the Eucharist. Covid has dampened our Eucharistic life.

Possibly, one can think of the first Christians who did not have proper building to come together or did not have 'ordained' priests to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. They came together as a community with fear and trembling, because of the rulers and celebrated the Word of God and breaking of bread that was blessed by the elders. One can remember and observe that it is love and sacrifice that makes the sacrament relevant—the sacrament of Eucharist cannot be locked down because it leads to freedom with remembrance and thanksgiving, animated by the Spirit!

1.5. Covid – Providing a Kairos Moment

Perhaps, the pandemic time is a Kairos moment. We call Kairos moment, the opportune time, where we experience God's abundant mercy and compassion. The Kairos moments allow us to get a glimpse of the divine. God gives us a rare chance of looking deep into the reality of life, the world, and the very cosmos itself. God surpasses time and space but as we know He is the author of both. We read in the Bible, "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day (2 Pet 3:8).

The point here is that this Kairos moment calls us to be a prophetic witness. While writing about prophetic imagination, Walter Brueggemann points out "the task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception

⁷Vinayak Jadav, Nearer, "My God, to Thee Finding God in the Second Wave," *Jivan* (June- July 2021) 3.

alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”⁸

The painful occurrences of Covid need to drive the Church and its ministers and people towards taking a prophetic stand. As Brueggemann points out this calls for an alternative approach instead of toeing in the official line. One of the very simple alternative modes is a change of nomenclature to physical distancing instead of social distancing! From the simple manner of communication, one can go on to build support groups and network people to be a prophetic witness!

1.6. Prisoners of a Virtual Reality

In his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis uses this poignant term. He rightly points out how we lost the taste and flavour of the truly real.⁹ During Covid 19, the power of the media was once again proved, many times not for the positive, life-giving effect on the populace but negative elements.

During the Covid 19 season, there was a ban on all sorts of physical gatherings fearing contamination and infection. On the other hand, there was no ban on the media that goes straight to people’s houses at full throttle. It is reported that during this panic time, there was a boom in online marketing. People were forced to stay indoors and they ordered everything online. Online ordering and consumption are applicable not only for food and groceries but also for all forms of digital content that people consume through their electronic equipments.

As the pandemic was in full swing, digital media looked like a saviour because of its ubiquitous reach and power. At the same time, the Holy Father minces no words in condemning the evil effects of digital media. He writes,

Digital media can also expose people to the risk of addiction, isolation and a gradual loss of contact with concrete reality, blocking the development of authentic interpersonal relationships... They lack the physical gestures, facial expressions, moments of silence, body language and even the smells, the trembling of hands, the blushes and perspiration that speak to us and are a part of human communication.... Digital relationships, which do not demand the slow and gradual cultivation of friendships, stable interaction or the building of a consensus that matures

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018, 3.

⁹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (Brothers and Sisters All) Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship, Mumbai: St Paul’s, 2020, No. 33.

over time, have the appearance of sociability. Yet they do not really build community; instead, they tend to disguise and expand the very individualism that finds expression in xenophobia and in contempt for the vulnerable. Digital connectivity is not enough to build bridges. It is not capable of uniting humanity.¹⁰

2. Lessons Learnt from the Pandemic

The pandemic has successfully run its race and finished its first and second rounds. During these 'rounds' it has claimed thousands of precious human lives along with upsetting some costly lives in the animal kingdom too!¹¹ Every crisis, it is said, is also an opportunity to learn and to study. Covid is no exception. The world has learnt some very costly lessons while paying the price for its folly and vices. Down below are some of the lessons that we have learnt.

3. A Divided World

Once again, we have learnt that we live in a divided world. This division and inequality are glaringly visible in the field of vaccination when we talk about the pandemic. So far, the medical world has presented several jabs to Covid patients. Some of them are Moderna (USA), Astra Zeneca/University of Oxford (UK), Pfizer/BioNTech (United States/Germany), Sinovac (China), Janssen/Johnson & Johnson (USA), Sputnik V (Russia), Covaxin of Bharat Biotech (India), Sinovac-CoronaVac (China) and Coviran Barekat from Shifa Pharmed Industrial Group (Iran).

The vaccines are plenty but they all come with a high price tag. According to the latest report, in India, Covishield from AstraZeneca is priced at Rs 780, Covaxin is priced at Rs 1,410, and Sputnik V is available at the cost of 1,145/- in the Indian market for private users.¹²

¹⁰Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, No. 43.

¹¹Natasha Daly, *Exclusive: Buddy, First Dog to Test Positive for COVID-19 in the U.S., has Died*, July 30, 2020 in National Geographic, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/first-dog-to-test-positive-for-Covid-in-us-dies>, accessed on 7th August 2021. Not only this dog, but a lioness also died of Covid in Chennai's Vandalur zoo. It is also reported that six 6 animal species like minks, monkeys, mice, sharks, horseshoe crabs and bats are dying because of COVID. See: Jordan Fenster, *Analysis: 6 animal species dying because of COVID* in <https://www.ctpost.com/news/coronavirus/slideshow/Analysis-6-animal-species-dying-because-of-COVID-210593.php>. Accessed on 7th August 2021.

¹²Centre caps vaccine prices; Covishield at Rs 780, Covaxin Rs 1410, in Times of India, Jun 8, 2021. See: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/centre-caps-vaccine-prices-covishield-at-rs-780-covaxin-rs-1410/articleshow/83343406.cms>. Accessed on 7th August 2021.

Though the companies justify their market rate, it is beyond the reach of the poor people. In India, many of the regional States are distributing the jabs free of cost but this is not the case for many of the poor African countries. Vaccination is still a mirage and a dream for many of the sub-Saharan countries. When the second Covid wave hit, India witnessed the innumerable poor families who were denied the needed Oxygen cylinders, because of the sudden demand and spike in the price. The plight of the poor has only increased its pangs of pathos during Covid 19 and we are reminded that the world is still unequal! We live in a fragmented world. The problems connected with healthcare and personal hygiene have once again demonstrated inequity among nations.

4. Embracing God in the Gigabytes

During the peak of Covid 19, churches were closed. All the other places of worship were locked, yet the surge for the search for God, for genuine spirituality was on the rise. Even ordinary people, those who have an internet connection, began to look for online Masses and other online liturgy services. Today there is a sudden surge of online spiritual materials. The mushroom growth of online spiritual webinars, Zoom and Google meetings are a case in point. Today God comes in the form of digital gigabytes and the pixel moments of the videos. Though the validity and orthodoxy of these online liturgies are questioned and doubted, the race is on, to capture the mental space of the faithful in the spiritual realm.

Meeting God in the digital space is a new challenge for the Church. Though there are podcasts and other ready to consume spiritual snippets in the form of video and audio clips, the full thrust of digital enormity has just dawned on the Church. This is yet again another opportunity to be exploited in the positive sense. It is high time that the Church uses its resources in the media to the fullest capacity to serve the faithful. Already in many places, people were bored with regular broadcasts connected with the routine liturgy. New forms of infotainment at the local and universal Church need to be spruced up.

5. The importance of the Ecosystem

“I do not want to speak of divine retribution, nor would it be sufficient to say that the harm we do to nature is itself the punishment for our offences.” These are the words of the Holy Father when he writes about the pandemic in *Fratelli Tutti*.¹³ Pope Francis

¹³Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, No. 34.

writes that this pandemic is not nature's punishment as opined by many people. Mother nature is a marvellous teacher. Instead of learning from her, the human person has been attempting to deface and disfigure her. This is an ongoing attempt that has the connivance of greed and power, joining hands. If nature wants to take revenge, because we humans have disturbed its equilibrium, then it would be beyond our whimsical imagination.

The ongoing forest fires in the United States of America, the Australian bushfires, devastating floods in Indonesia and very recently in Germany and other parts of Europe, volcano eruption in the Philippines, locust swarms in East Africa & Parts of India and Asia—these are some sample catastrophes that the world has witnessed. In the name of 'growth', many countries still pursue a destructive path, unmindful of the ecological damage and destruction they unleash on mother earth.

In June 2020, the UN environment chief and a leading economist said Covid-19 was an "SOS signal for the human enterprise" and that current economic thinking did not recognise that human wealth depends on nature's health. Damian Carrington, the environment editor of *The Guardian* writes that the illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade, as well as the devastation of forests and other wild places, were still the driving forces behind the increasing number of diseases leaping from wildlife to humans.¹⁴

Conceivably, the human family needs to know that nature can go on, inhabiting and populating the whole world, whereas the human person cannot live without anchoring themselves in nature. The pandemic has once again amplified the call for solidarity to protect and safeguard the environment.

6. The Fragility of the Human Nature

The pandemic has demonstrated how fragile we human beings are. During these months, the world has witnessed, scenes that were unimaginable before the pandemic. Families were separated, public places have downed their shutters, transportation is curtailed and face-masks are a new must. The new normalcy has become the time of quarantines, vaccinations and human distancing! The relational human person is advised not to touch anything and is punished if he joins a crowd!

¹⁴ Damian Carrington, Environment editor, *Pandemics result from destruction of nature, say UN and WHO, Wed 17 Jun 2020, The Guardian*. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/17/pandemics-destruction-nature-un-who-legislation-trade-green-recovery>. Accessed on 7th August 2021.

While writing about human fragility, Regina Ammicht Quinn, the ethics professor at the University of Tübingen quotes the German proverb: Scherben *bringen Glück*.¹⁵ Though it was a consoling proverb saying that when something is broken that brings us good luck, the reality reminds us how fragile we are. Today many things that we consider precious in life, lie in tatters. Our future, relationships, careers, dreams, planned progress for cities, our countries and environment, everything lies in pieces—as Professor Quinn observes.¹⁶

Maybe the fragility of life affected the Indian religious too in a very piercing manner. Many priests and nuns have lost their lives as I have mentioned earlier. It was a tsunami of deaths; every day brought some news of bereavement from the religious and the laity. It was and to some extent, still is a time of uncertainty. Crudely, once again the world was reminded that one cannot plan everything as if tomorrow is a promised dawn!

We have no tears left and our emotions are dried. The pandemic has no clear logic to be deciphered and to be decoded. Like the Biblical Job, one is full of questions as to why all this misery, unfortunate suffering and untimely death—all attributed to the pandemic. We are fragile, and we will continue to be broken and vulnerable if we truly think that we are the masters of the universe.

7. The importance of the Healthcare Mission

Jesus the ‘healer’ was the image invoked repeatedly during these suffering times. Along with health and healing, today we are forced to be on the watch for personal hygiene. One needs to be careful by not being a spreader of viruses! In the religious circles, numerous instances have been narrated and retold about how one particular member got infected and through him/her the whole community became disease-ridden.

Washing hands regularly, using sanitisers, wearing face masks, avoiding sneezing and coughing in public places, maintaining physical distance, forcing oneself to remain indoors—all these have become sacred activities, that are beneficial to the self and the society!

“*Mens sana in corpore sano*” – A healthy mind in a healthy body is the famous Latin phrase. This pandemic has once again brought to the limelight the importance of the individual as well as societal

¹⁵Regina Ammicht Quinn, “Handle with Care: Fragile Humans, a Pandemic, and the Legacy of the European Enlightenment,” *Jeevadhara LI* (2021) 301, at 27.

¹⁶Quinn, Handle with Care.

healthcare. Even people who have no faith in God, are forced to pay heed to the promptings of their family doctor. One has to salute the healthcare ministry of the Church for the relentless services they are rendering that tackles this pandemic with care and compassion.

8. Towards a World of Solidarity

In 2020, Reader's Digest brought out a special issue on the Corona pandemic. Among other articles, there were real-life stories, where human solidarity came into focus in a very strong manner. One such story is that of Miss Andrea Pien, who was a university counsellor at a secondary school. She describes in her essay how she helped her community members with money, during these troubled times.¹⁷

In his work *The Moral Wisdom*, James Keenan makes a special mention about Albert Camus' famous work 'The Plague.' According to Keenan, Camus recognized our secret, core sinfulness that is incredible and hidden, which is nothing but our selfishness.¹⁸ In his work, *The Plague*, the author talks about the great city of Oran. Its people respond gracefully and wickedly to the crisis of this pandemic. In a way, the plague exposed people's vulnerability and their core selfishness when they refused to reach out to other people.¹⁹ Following the same line of argument, one can say that the pandemics, lockdowns and human distancing tell a lot about ourselves and how we conduct ourselves in the private and public sphere!

While the selfishness and the greedy nature of corporations and companies are exposed during this pandemic, the basic lesson that we are social beings has been demonstrated, time and again. We live in an interdependent world. Digital platforms, cloud computing, teleconferences and another technical wizardry cannot match the real, human, face to face interaction. The pandemic has reminded us that we are still sailing on one single boat. The world is affected, threatened and has become very vulnerable for all of us.

This calls for works of solidarity. This work of solidarity, be it responding to the pandemic or rehabilitation work, needs authentic collaborators. This is the Lord's vineyard and as we share the bounty and produce, we need to share the responsibilities too.

¹⁷The New Neighbourhood Watch, *Reader's Digest – Coronavirus Special*, 2020, 43.

¹⁸James F. Keenan, *Moral Wisdom Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition*, Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010, 53.

¹⁹Keenan, *Moral Wisdom*, 53.

9. Challenges Ahead

In this last section, I would like to ruminate on the challenges ahead. This pandemic has created havoc and destroyed the livelihood of thousands of ordinary and poor people. The scientific community still talks about the possible third wave of the pandemic. The fact is that we do not know how long this uncertainty and vagueness about life and working conditions prevail. Amidst this chaos, these are some of the challenges:

- When the Covid situation was worse, the Churches were closed. There was a 'spiritual suffocation'! A retrospective question would be: Have we trained our laity to a mature devotion and spirituality or are they still infantile adherents to a routine liturgy? A more focussed question would be—how robust is our spirituality?
- We humans and specially Indians are inherently 'tactile.' How the Catholic Church is going to adhere to the new social norms without touching—in the areas of administering the sacraments? In baptism, water has to be 'poured' by a human hand and not from a machine.... likewise, all the sacraments are person-specific! How are we going to manoeuvre through the troubled waters?
- Another big challenge for the Church is the theological and missionary challenges posed by the televised/online Masses. Today, one can watch and participate in any online Mass, anywhere in the world—thanks to technology! It is highly beneficial for many elderly and the sick who yearn for the Eucharist. Some theologians like Michael Amaladoss raises the question of whether these online Masses are a (liturgical) Celebration or a mere spectacle?²⁰ Amaladoss says that in one of the live-streamed masses on Instagram, one Catharine said that this mass was very intimate and uplifting with people writing messages and sending emojis. Amaladoss emphatically says that spiritual communion can substitute for sacramental communion on the occasion of a live-streamed mass anywhere. I believe that this would be a challenge for many orthodox faithful!
- Many postmodern youth have already been distancing themselves from the Church espousing a robust spirituality and shunning Church-related ceremonies. Many also are getting comfortable with the online liturgy—with short, crisp sermons! Liturgy has become like a commodity in the market with people choosing the best, short

²⁰Michael Amaladoss, *Televised Masses During A Pandemic Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 84, 6 (June 2020) 430 - 437.

online Mass available. How are we going to win these congregations back to the altar?

- Covid-19 is sure to be another *locus theologicus*. In the post Covid-19 time, there would be many discussions about the impact of lockdowns and many literary churning about the state of the faithful. This pandemic has already generated tomes of discussions about the ethics of life, medical care, the tyranny of pharmaceutical markets, the growing ambit of technology, questions about God, spirituality—among other areas. Are we ready to tackle the barrage of faith-related questions?

- “The Church looks with admiration and gratitude upon the many consecrated persons who, by caring for the sick and the suffering, contribute in a significant way to her mission... they carry on the ministry of the mercy of Christ,” wrote St John Paul II, in *Vita Consecrata*. One has to salute them! At the same time, it is also true that while other denominations have opened wards to serve the Corona patients, some of ours have stubbornly closed our clinical doors. Our doctrinal emphasis on Christian charity needs to be actualized!

- It is true that after the outbreak of Covid-19, the Indian Church went out, massively to help people with its relief and rehabilitation work. However, a much-needed Prophetic stand was missing. As I had quoted Walter Brueggemann, somehow the Church as a corporate body failed to speak against unjust policies. The Church was never an outspoken critique of governmental programmes that make the victims of the pandemic more miserable. It was reported that some of the pastors refused to come out of their rooms, lacking human sensitivity and failing in pastoral charity!²¹ It is better to train our pastors to be more sensitive to the smell of the sheep!

- Every crisis presents an opportunity. BBC reported that one of the churches in London, sold oil for 91 pounds to cure Covid-19. Why 91? Because Psalm 91 talks about pestilence! The Indian Church could have done more in venturing out uncharted avenues during this disturbing time, like offering telephone counselling to the victims. Have we missed the bus?

- The Church needs to sharpen its antenna towards political awareness while facing this pandemic. The ungodly forces are at work, damaging and garrotting the democratic process, using lockdowns and curfews. The death of Fr Stan Swamy, in police

²¹Prakash Louis, *Covid 19: A Testing Time for the Shepherds of the Indian Church*, *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 84, 7 (July 2020) 508.

custody is just an infinitesimal example. The Church needs to use this time to galvanize people through digital and other possible means to strengthen the muscles of democracy.

Conclusion

Full many a gem of purest ray serene
 The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:
 Full many a flower is born to blush unseen
 And waste its sweetness on the desert air

These are celebrated lines from the poem *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* by Thomas Gray. This was a poem that gave one a critical look at the English society of his time. The Elegy was a poem about life, death and the afterlife. In these lines, the poet celebrates and brings into focus the very ordinary lives of people. These ordinary, everyday people are like costly gems scattered in the seabed or like a flower that has blossomed in the desert and wasted its fragrance, without anyone noticing.

Like these gems and flowers, this pandemic has brought to the main stage, many unsung heroines and heroes. Many frontline health workers have contributed mightily to the patients. Though their works or their faces remain anonymous and hidden, theirs is nevertheless, heroic deeds. As we know, a rose is a rose whether people appreciate its fragrance or not! John Milton wrote in Sonnet 19: 'They also serve who only stand and wait.' When humanity suffers, it is the anonymous people who serve the human family most! The Church needs to recognize and give a face to these anonymous Good Samaritans!

As we enter the Church premises, there is a hand sanitiser! Perhaps a "Soul-Sanitizer" to cleanse the soul could have been a better option! May God give us a new heart with a new spirit as we read in the book of Ezekiel. One of the strongest messages of this pandemic is that humanity is very fragile and vulnerable. Even without the human person, the creation would go on. It is said that God added the human person only on the sixth day, the last day of his creation. Are they the capstone and pinnacle of His creation or his perpetual migraine? The same argument holds to His Church too!

Fear, very many times sits at the centre of life's pendulum. At one extreme, fear can become paranoia but on the other extreme, fear can turn to be a life asserting hope! Healthy fear is welcome and at the same time let us not forget that we are Easter people and Alleluia is our song!