Editorial:

COVID-19 AND THE CRY OF THE POOR
Sensitivity and Solidarity

COVID-19 is an infectious respiratory disease caused by the coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, first reported in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Since then as I write this on 10 June 2020, it spread globally to 188 countries with 7,127,753 confirmed cases and 407,159 deaths. The new coronavirus simply took over the planet and devastated the world, said Anthony Fauci, the head of US COVID-19 task force: "We've never been in a situation like that ever in history, where we had to essentially shut down the planet." Together with physical health, the pandemic affects mental health: Fear and worry of contamination can leave one stressed, anxious, and powerless, draining the weak and vulnerable emotionally leading to depression and even suicide. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic raises many ethical issues, related to priority-setting, health-care workers' rights and obligations, clinical trials, social distancing, surveillance, etc. Principles and values such as cost-effectiveness, transparency, stewardship, autonomy, beneficence, fairness, justice, and many others inform policy making for institutions and Governments.

Often it is said "we are all in one boat," pointing to the fact that the virus is capable of affecting every one of us; however, it is also quickly pointed out that we are all neither in it in the same way nor in it together. Overall health of the person, economic status, health facilities of the region and country, political leadership, NGOs, etc. do make differences. It is a sad fact and an ethical issue that unjust inequalities exist within and among the nations between men and women, urban and rural, adults and children, rich and poor, literate and illiterate, netizens and non-netizens, etc., and the disadvantaged groups suffer disproportion-ately from the disastrous effects of COVID-19 pandemic. People in deprived areas are dying of coronavirus at double the rate of affluent areas. The impact of wealth on health is shocking; the economic policies guiding the political power have widened the

health and wealth divide. The UN's Framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response to the COVID-19 Crisis warns that "The COVID-19 pandemic is far more than a health crisis: it is affecting societies and economies at their core. While the impact of the pandemic will vary from country to country, it will most likely increase poverty and inequalities at a global scale, making achievement of SDGs even more urgent."

It is important to ensure that those who are most vulnerable to COVID-19 are protected from infection as much as possible. Such emergencies underline the fact that we are inter-connected and inter-dependent: we owe each other as fellow human beings of equal moral worth. Sensitivity and solidarity are important at the local, national, and international levels in the way we all respond to the pandemic. Individual autonomy founded on the inherent dignity and worth of the individual is to be respected without prejudice to the common good. Medical, informational, and financial support for less capable people and countries are essential during the pandemic. The research required to develop effective treatments and vaccines also depends on international collaboration, and on adequate funding from both governments and philanthropic organisations.

Pandemic outbreaks are periods of great uncertainty. Events unfold, resources and capacities are stretched to the limit, and decisions are to be made quickly even when the evidence for decision-making may be scant. The world of science and technology, economy and markets, finance and businesses, politics and social life, cultural and religious leadership, arts and entertainment, and indeed all aspects of human lives are challenged. In such situations, all people involved – public health officials, policy-makers, funders, researchers, field epidemiologists, first responders, national ethics boards, health-care workers, and public health practitioners need ethical principles to guide them in their decision-making.

COVID-19 crisis provides opportunities for constructing ethical societies. We should move away from the money driven market societies to value driven ethical societies, where the maxim 'to each according to one's purchasing power' is replaced

with 'to each according to one's needs.' We should move towards more sustainable lifestyles and livelihoods, which serve all and leave no one behind, including other species. Our planet cannot physically support the exponential economic growth designed by and for the rich and the powerful. The rich have enjoyed soaring incomes and growing political power. The same economic trends threaten the emerging economies, where wealth and corruption are on the rise, widening the gap between the rich and the poor, wealth and health, evermore.

The ability to change and reflect on life's priorities include changing our relationships in work, family and neighbourhood environments and situations with more time for each other. Managing to live with less and having less and yet becoming more in our humanity and fulfilment. Working for the common good and learning to be grateful for every day by appreciating life and appreciating one another could be a great lesson to be learned from COVID-19.

The pandemic has given us a clear indication of the vulnerability and fragility of modern life and the modern world; it has also taught that we can overcome global challenges only by showing solidarity with one another and embracing the most vulnerable in our midst. We live in this common home as one family with God's other creatures. Though COVID-19 pandemic is a health issue, and the priority is to provide health care services to prevent and control contagion, it is an ethical issue inextricably connected with economic and political issues.

Gandhiji once wrote in a letter to a friend tormented by doubts: "I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, try the following expedient: 'Recall the face of the poorest and the most helpless man whom you may have seen and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he be able to gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to Swaraj or self-rule for the hungry and also spiritually starved millions of our countrymen?' Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away." Gandhi advocated *Anthyodaya* (uplift of the last)

for Sarvodaya (uplift of all). When we reflect and deliberate on COVID-19, may I suggest this Gandhian talisman as a practical ethical principle.

In this issue of the *Journal of Dharma* on "Towards Ethical Societies: *Kairos* of COVID-19 Pandemic" there are seven articles investigating different dimensions of the pandemic and its underlying ethical implications. In the first article, "*Kairos* of the Corona Pandemic *Time* for a True World Political Authority with Moral Credibility?" Edward Joseph Alam argues that a trustworthy *true* world political authority, with reliable moral credibility, is needed now more than ever. Amid this new *kairos*, when the world is faced with an invisible, undiscriminating enemy, the world is forced to come together in a unique way and unite for the common good. According to Alam, the new normal of *social distancing* may be a new chance for *social justice*.

According to Victor Ferrao, the coronavirus pandemic along with large scale destruction of human life has triggered a collapse of our moral principles and ethical values. His paper, "Loss of Right Choice: Ethical Quandary in the Wake of Coronavirus" seeks an equate response to our moral quandaries. The author reviews the moral culpability of akratic actions under the precarious conditions of inescapable vulnerabilities introduced by coronavirus. This consideration of weakening of human will or agency is profoundly significant to account for the morality of human actions triggered through customised advertisements or messages to targeted individuals, as a result Big Data analytics to serve the interest of commerce or politics.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a significant challenge to governments all over the world. In many ways, it has exposed the weaknesses of the Philippine government and its structures. While the government rightly imposed a lockdown on its people, it resulted in the marginalization of the poor. If only government policies and programs were informed by the Catholic social tradition, the government would be in a better position of truly being at the service of its people. Ruben C. Mendoza in "What If: COVID-19 in the Philippines in the Light of the Catholic Social Tradition" argues that the crisis presents a unique opportunity to

the government to rethink of its structures and projects. It would enable the government to contribute to the formation of communities that foster human dignity and development.

The paper "Hope against Despair: Reading Cronin in Times of Global Pandemic" by Joseph Varghese Kusumalayam examines human quest for meaning and happiness in absurdity, incredulity, uncertainty, and meaninglessness through a reading of A. J. Cronin's 1941 novel, *The Keys of the Kingdom*. Cronin's experience as a doctor enabled him to bring out a literary treatment of an epidemic in 1941. Caught in the sweeping tides of the World War II, the world was swamped with hatred and meaninglessness, strangled by fear and crushed beneath the terror of the arms race. This was a time when people had lost faith in themselves, faith in everything, and nations of the world were fighting against each other. With the current situation of the world being not too dissimilar, Father Francis' story may give readers an answer to what the world can turn to during a pandemic. Same as COVID-19 works as an act and a process, Father Chisholm's life too epitomises the process meaningfully.

Ignace Haaz finds it surprising that not much debate or critical interaction has taken place on the choice of locking down most of the populace in 185 countries after the outbreak of COVID-19. The general lockdown, instead of testing and isolating the sick, can be seen as 'a gross usurpation upon the liberty of private life.' The essay, "Coronavirus and Value Pluralism: A Robust Ethical Perspective on a Pandemic" reviews some of the problematic situations highlighting that no society is free or can achieve the objective of a fairly pluralistic set of values without a given social practice of these values, and shows how this logic of spreading of values unfolds in the context of the Coronavirus crisis.

The article, "Stocktaking in the Time of a Pandemic: Atypical Philosophical, Theological, and Other Observations" by Jibu Mathew George discusses a possible meta-framework within which ethical, philosophical, theological, socio-cultural, and other perspectives on COVID-19 can be formulated and evaluated, making a heuristic distinction between the event (here, the pandemic) as a non-negotiable 'core' and the event as a 'text' open

to interpretation, each with its own ethical implications. Human subjects interpret events against a long-temporal hermeneutic horizon. After distinguishing between a religious and a secular understanding of the phenomenon (from an ethical perspective, a 'perplexing randomness' seems to set apart what is unfolding now from occurrences in the Biblical world), the author makes a case for an ecological ethic in the context of religious naturalism. The article concludes with an exploration of ethical choice amid extreme experience.

Exploring the question of ethics in times of pestilence as during COVID-19, via the ideas of Simon Blackburn, Jean Paul Sartre, and Henry Louis Gates Jr, "Ethics and Pestilence: Discerning the Greater Common Good and Mutual Reciprocity" by Etienne Rassendren employs the representational notions of Gayatri Spivak and Stuart Hall as ways of seeing, so as to map and evaluate Biblical-Hebrew Exodus stories in relation to the current COVID-19 pandemic. The article argues that there is a close similarity between the Egyptian plague experience and the current pestilence, and that social action based on the ethics of common good and bio-centric mutual reciprocity are adequate responses for restoring current society to its ethical orientation and practice.

In solidarity with the whole of humankind, especially the sick and the poor, the front-liners who contribute their level best to contain the pandemic and to reduce its short-term and long-term ill-effects, and the visionaries who challenge us to turn this crisis into opportunities for creating ethical societies, may I have the joy of presenting this issue of the *Journal of Dharma* on "Towards Ethical Societies: *Kairos* of the COVID-19 Pandemic" for your reading and reflection.

Jose Nandhikkara
Editor-in-Chief