



## Theological Themes in 'Post-Pandemic Times'

Although the current issue of *Budyong* situates this academic undertaking in 'post-pandemic times', I am uncertain about the accuracy of this claim. It seems overly confident to assume this, given that we have not yet completely eradicated the pathogen. There are still parts across the globe where infection rates remain elevated, leading to fatalities. Undoubtedly, the pandemic has inflicted immense misery and grief onto our most vulnerable people, as well as the changes, challenges, and opportunities brought about by this global crisis. All of these are impetus for exigent theological reflection and conversations.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, I have the audacity to pose theological inquiries: "Which topics, concerns, and discussions demand our utmost consideration?" "What are the theological consequences of these questions for the believing community?" "In what manner do these issues impact our mission initiatives?" The eight articles we carefully chose do not purport to provide comprehensive

answers to these questions, but they would enable involvement with a variety of issues impacting our lives in this post-pandemic era. In this volume, we take our part in hosting a conversation, and may it generate more questions and realizations that this really should be an ongoing dialogue, starting from our small community and extending to a broader audience.

We recall that within the period of the pandemic, in October 2021, the opening of the process of the synod of synodality, Pope Francis invited all believers to join together on this synodal journey to renew the church in the spirit of Vatican II. Writing within the Philippine context, Danilo Agustin Jr. is convinced that the invitation of the Pope is an opportune time to articulate, “In What Sense is BEC an Expression of Synodality in the Grassroots?” He explained that “the BECs can be viewed as a vibrant embodiment of a synodal church at the grassroots level. They actively exemplify the synodal principles of decentralization, discernment, participation, cooperation, and being missional.”

Although written with the aim of proposing an alternative to the traditional understanding of church authority as hierarchical, I am personally convinced that this is not exclusively an ecclesiological concern but secular as well. While the spirit of the synodal church is a concrete pastoral response to gradually renew the true identity of all local churches as mirrors of the Trinitarian relationship and communion, the secular must also strive to keep pace with these developments. During the pandemic, we all experienced the evident consolidation of autocratic power and the implementation of militaristic measures by the government to control the spread of the virus at the

expense of protecting human rights and respecting human dignity. Kim Mendoza's article, "A Polyhedron Model of the Magisterium's Authority", is very relevant to both church people and those who consider themselves secular but are passionate about decentralizing political authority by empowering ordinary citizens, particularly those from the peripheries.

Niel John G. Capidos is "Proposing an Ethics of Solidarity and Care: Learning from the Rough Grounds of Mindanao and Catholic Social Thought." As an eyewitness, he shared amazing stories about how, in spite of rigorous restrictions from the government, the fear of catching the virus, and the very limited resources and options to connect person to person during the pandemic, concrete initiatives of solidarity and care coming from individuals and local communities emerged and even flourished. He identified and interviewed ten (10) Mindanawons who narrated stories of not just struggle and frustration but of dynamism and hope through kitchen pantry initiatives, food rationing and medical outreach, visits to the sick, etc. These concrete solidarity initiatives and caring strategies in an unusual environment possess extraordinary powers to inspire others and, at the same time, challenge us to rethink our common understanding of the church's pastoral service and mission.

The 500-year anniversary of the arrival of Christianity was celebrated in our country from April 2021 to April 2022, amidst the height of the pandemic. Filipinos who tend to focus on the crimes and atrocities committed during colonialism contend that there is absolutely no reason for celebration, while others still find significant reason to celebrate with the positive contribution of the Christianization of Filipinos in mind. While many Filipino

historians would focus more on the negative entanglements of the colonial past resulting in anti-Spanish, anti-missionary, and anti-Christian sentiments, the thought-provoking article by Terence Wee, CSsR, on “The Case for Positive Entanglements with the Colonial Past: Singapore as Locus Theologicus of Contextual Theology” motivates us to revisit our history from a new perspective, not only to prevent repeating past errors but also to uncover valuable aspects of our previously colonized territory that have been overlooked.

The pandemic is intricately linked to the ecological crisis. COVID-19 was hypothesized by certain environmentalists to be a zoonotic disease. A human being became the host of the virus when (s)he violated natural boundaries due to unabated consumerism and materialism. The lockdown had dual effects, serving as a boon by significantly reducing carbon emissions but also acting as a bane by leading to a substantial increase in waste, including face masks, infectious materials, and plastics, primarily owing to the surge in food deliveries and online shopping. Melanio Aoanan’s “Creation Theology in the Context of Mindanao Today” invites us to learn and unlearn our biblical teachings, which serve as the fundamental principles guiding our connection with the rest of creation. He strongly suggested that to further make a great impact, we need to ecumenically harmonize our theology and spirituality and consolidate our responses to environmental problems. Moreover, he held the belief that the Lumads of Mindanao possess a profound ecological spirituality and lifestyle from which we certainly get valuable insights.

Elton Viagedor, OFM's "YHWH Leads His People Out of Oppression:" A Narrative-Literary Analysis of Exodus 3:1-12" is an scholarly work designed to be accessible to general readers and presents a God who possesses the ability to 'hear', 'see', and 'know' the anguish and subjugation experienced by his people. Yahweh, via his servant Moses, has assumed the role of a true and trustworthy Shepherd for his flock in distress, guiding them towards liberation. The primary difficulty in this biblical discourse lies in our struggle to reconcile the compassionate and enduring presence of God with the profound and pervasive realities of sickness, mortality, isolation, starvation, injustice, oppression, despair, and disconnection from both the community and the divine. This challenge was particularly pronounced during the ongoing pandemic and continues to persist today. However, the nature of God's abiding presence is enduring. He manifests His divine concerns through ordinary people with an extraordinary sense of service, like the frontliners, parents, breadwinners, men, and women risking their lives to shepherd others. The shepherd motif has long been associated with the priestly vocation. That being said, I think everyone is meant to hear this call today.

Prior to his ordination in 2022, Mark Anthony Zarate, OFM, immersed himself in several communities at the peripheries and spent several months in the mountainous mission area in Labangon, Dumingag, in Zamboanga del Sur as part of his religious and priestly formation. He also helped organize some initiatives to help the most affected during the pandemic, like feeding in Indangan, Davao City, and food rationing to frontliners in one of the hospitals in Davao City. His article, "Listening

to Ordinary Narratives of Faith: Affirming Transcendence in Human Experience,” is the product of those immersion experiences called theologizing in everyday life. These experiences involve listening to the daily stories of individuals who exhibit unwavering faith in a benevolent God despite facing immense challenges and hardships. Ordinarily, we tend to disregard the tales of the poor as being simplistic and lacking depth. However, the author believes that their faith-narratives demonstrate their innate ability to perceive a reality beyond the limitations of human understanding, particularly in the face of a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

The essay “The Christmas Crib: Its Meaning Today” by Antonio Ma. Rosales, OFM, is taken from his recently published book of the same title. Rosales is a moral theologian, an accomplished writer, and a self-taught historian. The theology of the incarnation holds great importance in Franciscan spirituality and theology. It emphasizes the manifestation of God’s attributes, such as humility, poverty, selflessness, vulnerability, powerlessness, and love, through Jesus. Francis, the founder of the Franciscan Order, sought to imitate and pass on these qualities to his fellow brothers. These ideals challenged the dominance of anthropocentrism, rationalism, scientism, materialism, totalitarianism, etc., all of which have contributed to the current social problems. The captivating allure and aesthetic appeal of the Belen, showcased throughout the Christmas season, gained immense popularity not only in the Philippines but globally. It reflects our shared aspiration to emulate Jesus’ profound intimacy with the Father.

In conclusion, representing the *Budyong* Editorial Board, I express the desire that the fresh inquiries and novel insights arising from this modest scholarly endeavor will serve as both motivation and provocation for all of us, especially in Mindanao and across the country, as we persist in pondering, “Which theological themes in our community require our utmost attention?” Furthermore, how do these themes specifically influence our local theology, spirituality, and mission initiatives?

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