

# From fear to siblinghood, compassion and love: the role of faith communities in the time of the coronavirus pandemic

## Do medo à fraternidade, compaixão e amor: o papel das comunidades de fé em tempos de pandemia do coronavírus

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### Abstract

This article presents the argument according to which pandemics have always affected the human society, the current COVID-19 being the latest of the series of health crisis that affects humankind. The objectives of this paper were fourfold. First, it traced the development of global epidemics that have plagued the world, drawing lessons from classics in fiction and non-fiction literature. Second, it investigated the impact of the current pandemic on human lives today. Third, it examined the role of the churches and faith-based groups individuals in response to the needs of the people during the pandemic. Fourth, it laid down further tasks that need to be undertaken during this health crisis. Critical international political economy, deep ecology, eco-centrism and the human rights-based approach guided this research. An Asia-wide ecumenical fellowship of national councils and churches served as the case study. Specifically, it investigated the ways in which the churches responded to the pandemic in relation to migrant workers and food security.

### Keywords

COVID-19 pandemic. Faith communities. Ecumenism. Migrant workers. Food insecurity.

### Resumo

Este artigo apresenta o argumento segundo o qual as pandemias sempre afetaram a sociedade humana, sendo a atual COVID-19 a mais recente de uma série de crises de saúde que afetam a humanidade. Os objetivos deste artigo são quatro. Primeiro, ele traçou o desenvolvimento de epidemias globais que assolaram o mundo, tirando lições de clássicos da literatura de ficção e não ficção. Em segundo lugar, investigou o impacto da atual pandemia nas vidas humanas hoje. Terceiro, examinou o papel das igrejas e dos indivíduos de grupos religiosos em resposta às necessidades das pessoas durante a pandemia. Em quarto lugar, estabeleceu outras tarefas que precisam ser realizadas durante esta crise de saúde. A economia política internacional crítica, a ecologia profunda, o ecocentrismo e a abordagem baseada nos direitos humanos orientaram esta pesquisa. Uma comunhão ecumênica de conselhos nacionais e igrejas em toda a Ásia serviu como estudo de caso. Especificamente, investigou as maneiras pelas quais as igrejas responderam à pandemia em relação aos trabalhadores migrantes e à segurança alimentar.

### Palavras-chave

Pandemia de COVID-19. Comunidades de fé. Ecumenismo. Trabalhadores migrantes. Insegurança alimentar.

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## INTRODUCTION: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

We live in a time of intense contradictions. Despite advances in science and technology, including artificial intelligence (AI), we humans live in dangerous times during which we cannot control the spread of the novel coronavirus, also known as SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19. This pandemic demonstrates that free-market corporate globalization is biologically unsustainable. The disease lays bare our tininess in the scheme of things. It knows no borders and hits everyone. While scientists are working hard to find a vaccine or magic pill to stifle the virus, we must remember that the ruling classes throughout recent history use bacteria and virus to create both bacteriological weapons and the quarantining of our rights and freedoms.

Epidemics and pandemics are nothing new. We humans believe we are on top of the animal kingdom. Yet, viruses and bacteria control the world from time to time. The Roman Empire had collapsed under an epidemic. During the bubonic plague, countless people died. The black death recurred for centuries stretching from Central Asia to the rest of Europe, thanks to international maritime commerce. Other epidemics included the Spanish flu, SARS and MERS. In 2020, the whole world is on high alert. As the world experiences a pandemic, we are to varying degrees on quarantine, lockdown and self-isolation as prevention to flatten the curve, which also flattened jobs, small businesses and livelihood, especially of workers and small business owners.

This article asked and responded to the following queries. What lessons can we learn from the past about human existence and pandemics? How does the pandemic affect our daily lives now? What roles do the faith communities perform during this health crisis?

To respond to the above queries, the objectives of this article are the following: to trace the past discourses about the existential threat of pandemics on human society; to analyze the current impact of the pandemic on human lives; to investigate the role that faith communities play during the pandemic; and, to envision the immediate tasks to cope with and respond to the pandemic.

## 1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical international political economy, deep ecology, eco-centrism and the human rights-based approach are the major theoretical perspectives that guide the conduct of this research. One, critical international political economy (SHIELDS; BRUFF; MACARTNEY, 2011) identifies the intimate relationship among nature on the one hand and society on the other hand, which is composed of the economy, politics, ideology and culture. Two, deep ecology (SINGER, 1979) is the philosophy according to which every natural thing has an intrinsic value, regardless of their utility to human beings. A term related to deep ecology is eco-centrism (NAESS, 1973), which is the belief and practice according to which all matter and living things have intrinsic value for which reason we as human beings must be heedful of and protect the

integrity of the natural world, if we are to survive. Three, the human rights-based approach<sup>2</sup> puts the interest of the people at the center of society whom the state apparatus, as their representatives, must serve.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

This article is a critical review of literature, which employed several sources to document the evolution of philosophy and theology of human thought about pandemics and their impact on society. Classics, seminal literature, as well as the latest writings in literature, philosophy, political science, economics and sociology provide insights about the impact of pandemics on social life, both in the past and in the present. There are references to the Bible, both from the Old Testament and the New Testament. Past authors included Boccaccio, Luther, Bodin, Hobbes, Weber, Bentham, Orwell, Camus, Sartre and Foucault. Among the current writers are Chomsky, Varoufakis, Stiglitz, Klein, Horvat, Hasan, Ali and Ocasio-Cortez.

In addition, a case study of activities of faith communities are monitored and cited, specifically those based in or concerning Asia, many of which have engaged in Asia-wide live consultations through video chats, given that international travels as well as face-to-face conferences were mostly rendered impossible almost for the entire year of 2020. Personally, I have organized two Asia-wide live online gathering, one of which was on the impact of this current health crisis on migrant workers and the other was on food insecurity. In addition, I was engaged in participant observation in these Asia-wide live video consultations during the pandemic in the year 2020. Topics discussed on the role of faith communities during the COVID-19 crisis were numerous, among which were the following: role of women, combating trafficking in women, human rights violations in the Philippines, people living with HIV and AIDS, victims of explosions in Lebanon, racism and inequality in the U.S., food insecurity, the right to health amidst the pandemic, the role of the churches during the pandemic and the impact of this health crisis on migrant workers.

## **3 FINDINGS: LESSONS FROM THE PAST**

What lessons can we learn from prominent thinkers about the relationship of power, mega projects and pandemics in fiction and nonfiction? For four years, during the black plague from 1347 to 1351, thirty-three percent of people in Europe died. Giovanni Boccaccio wrote a book, *Decameron* (BOCACCIO, 2003), about ten days during which six young Florentines of affluent background quarantined in the countryside. They amused themselves with music, dance and storytelling. Here, we learn that people of privileged circumstances, both in the past and in the present, can escape epidemics.

Political thinker Bodin in political thought (BODIN, 1576), political philosopher Hobbes in political philosophy (HOBBS, 2012) and Weber in sociology (WEBER, 2004)

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<sup>2</sup> Available in: <<https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/human-rights-based-approach>>.

concurrent in advancing the contention according to which that the state has the monopoly of the use of force. Weber (WEBER, 2004), for instance, indicated that rulers since antiquity used discipline for their self-aggrandizement, such as the construction of the pyramids in North African Middle East and the trafficking and abuse of free people as slave labor in agricultural production in the Americas. People are programmed to perform tasks to suit the interests and needs of the powerful economic and political elites.

In his book *The plague* (CAMUS, 1947), Camus wrote: “The plagues indeed are a common thing, but one hardly believes in the plagues when they fall on your head.” True to his existentialist philosophy, Camus says plagues cause suffering which is randomly distributed and thus is absurd. He noted that when people praise medical professionals for their heroism, most would say they were not being heroic, just “doing my job.”

In his *Discipline and punish* (1975), Foucault gave a stern warning about what the ruling elites do to control the people. Due to the fear of the plague, institutions and techniques are used to measure, quantify, supervise, discipline and control the population, especially the sick and those deemed abnormal. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century plague, governments resorted to quarantine and purification campaigns, which included partitioning off spaces, closure of houses, inspection and registration. However, these draconian solutions create new social problems. People internalized their fear and became submissive sheep as they are being monitored. Authoritarian and totalitarian surveillance measures and powers become normalized and permanent, which have implications to civil liberties and human rights. Bentham’s panopticon and Orwell’s Big Brother are metaphors of the surveillance state. People lose their civil liberties way beyond the duration of the epidemic. Hence, ruling powers’ measures to deal with epidemics have long-term impact on human rights.

#### **4 IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON HUMAN SOCIETY TODAY**

Under the current international political economy in the time of the pandemic, more contradictions come into play. There are (1) non-antagonistic contradictions between the economic elite and the political elite; and (2) antagonistic contradictions between the ruling classes on the one hand and people and nature on the other hand. In a word, we are witnessing a clash of values in favor of (1) selfishness or (2) compassion at work.

What are needed now are mass testing, medical equipment, medical supplies and food supplies, the latter especially for the poor and marginalized during the quarantine and lockdown. The political elites are torn between serving the health needs of the people and the economic motive of profit of the economic elites. Some political elites align themselves with the economic elites, while others with the masses of the people. Some governments err on the side of big business, opting to conduct business as usual as soon as possible at the peril of exponentially increasing coronavirus infections, while others err on the side of the health of the people. Some governments are half-hearted in providing the much-needed medical supplies and equipment

needed during the pandemic, while others provide full medical support for the people. Some national governments make local governments engage in a bidding war for ventilators and masks, while others provide free and full medical support to health workers and the sick, regardless of citizenship. Thus, some political elites view wealth more favorably over health, while others consider health as wealth.

Instead of inflating their egos, the ruling powers should show their leadership, take their responsibilities, as well as use compassion and fact-based science in decision-making, especially in emergency situations. Lack of or delayed action to prevent the spread of the disease shows their lack of leadership.

We are witnessing the best and the worst in humanity at play right now. The world is not flat and we don't have a level playing field, as we do not suffer equally during the pandemic. Sartre stressed that plagues highlight the contradictions between classes: epidemics attack the poor and spare the rich who disinfect their homes and ask their cleaning ladies to enter their homes first and stay there for a week to ensure it is safe for the rich to enter. Many individuals post online, offering help to strangers, family and friends alike. At the same time, discrimination and hatred abound. The rich hoard goods and hide in luxurious bunkers with medical and culinary staff. The poor cannot afford to be sick and not work. Day laborers, gig workers, poor peasants, street vendors and small businesses have a day-to-day economic cycle. The very poor stay in densely occupied living quarters and the homeless don't a roof above their heads: so much for physical (or "social") distancing for the poor. Washing hands with soap and water is a great preventive measure. However, roughly 785 million people, or one in nine persons on Earth, do not have access to safe water. Clearly, the current situation and the involuntary lockdowns to varying degrees around the world have a lopsided effect on the poor, small peasant villagers, self-employed and small businesses. Furthermore, some partners and spouses are trapped in domestic violence during lockdowns.

On the macro level, Noam Chomsky (CHOMSKY, 2017), Yani Varoufakis (VAROUFAKIS, 2019), Joseph Stiglitz (STIGLITZ, 2020), Naomi Klein (KLEIN, 2020), Srećko Horvat (HORVAT, 2020), Mehdi Hasan (HASAN, 2011), Tariq Ali (ALI; KUNSTLER, 2019) and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez emphasize that during crises, such as political turmoil, economic depression, natural disasters, or pandemics, off-the-leash predatory free-market disaster capitalism is at work. Economic and political elites capitalize on crises, making money from people's misery. Some governments bail out the already super-rich and call for austerity for the urban and rural poor: this is a case of socialism for the rich. This is the sorry state of our current history.

## **5 FAITH COMMUNITIES AT THE HEIGHT OF THE PANDEMIC**

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) (CHRISTIAN CONFERENCE OF ASIA, 2020a) is an ecumenical forum of cooperation among the member churches (CHRISTIAN

CONFERENCE OF ASIA, 2020b) and national councils (CHRISTIAN CONFERENCE OF ASIA, 2020c) of churches in Asia, among its members include Protestant, Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Evangelicals and home churches. The CCA has member churches or councils in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iran, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Timor Leste, Vietnam and more. Though technically, as of this writing, there are no direct member churches in the Gulf states in the Middle East, the CCA pays attention to and is concerned about the situation of both blue-collar and white-collar Asian migrant laborers working there, which include professionals in all fields of expertise but also domestic workers and construction workers.

At the height of the pandemic in 2020, the CCA responded to the call of the times by organizing the churches and council of churches through online gatherings, the purpose of which was to be in solidarity with the people during these difficult times and to share wisdoms about what to do with the challenges with which we are confronted. One online reflection focused specifically on the role of the church during the pandemic (ANON, 2020e). As the program coordinator for peacebuilding, I have organized two Asia-wide online conferences on burning issues, which were the first and the last sessions: the first was on the impact of the pandemic on migrant workers (ANON, 2020e), while the last was on the impact of COVID-19 on food insecurity (ANON, 2020d). Other themes included the following: the right to health during the pandemic (ANON, 2020b) as well as the impact of COVID-19 on women (CHRISTIAN CONFERENCE OF ASIA, 2020) and on children (ANON, 2020c). The faith communities dealt with these important issues on which the pandemic has a great impact: the role of the church to respond to the needs of the people in general, migrant workers, women, the youth to safety, health, well-being food security and protection. I discuss some of these issues in greater detail below.

### **5.1 Church response to the pandemic**

The CCA organized an online gathering during which church leaders and members from all over Asia shared what they are doing to alleviate the agony of the people during the pandemic. In these difficult times, the church is called to look inwards, reflect on its faith, its diaconal mission in the world today, its prophetic witness to the suffering of the people in the world today and ecumenical unity in response to the current global situation.

The current pandemic has laid bare the stark inequality in human society during which the poor have difficulties fending for themselves. This pandemic, which is a health crisis has ushered in an economic crisis, a food security crisis, a social crisis and a mental health crisis. Archbishop Sebouh Sarkissian, the prelate of the Armenian Orthodox Church in Iran, recalled that hardships are part of the human condition but is reassured of Paul's message of hope (MATHEN, 2020a).



Roman Catholic priest, William LaRousse, the deputy secretary of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), said that, just as the Protestant churches, the Roman Catholic churches are working with local and national governments as well as bishops' conferences in different countries in response to the burning needs of the people today during the pandemic. These measures include relief work, such as housing the homeless, providing quarantine facilities and distributing food. CARITAS, the charitable organization of the Roman Catholic Church, coordinates the relief efforts to ease the distress of the affected people.

Bishop Reuel Normal Marigza, the general secretary of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines, shared the information according to which Protestant, Roman Catholic and Evangelical councils provide compassionate relief to the underprivileged, regardless of their creed, including indigenous peoples during the pandemic. Archbishop Willem T. P. Simarmata, the moderator of the CCA, underscored the need of churches to collaborate with other faith groups and non-governmental organizations to provide for the needs of the most vulnerable in society, as the church is called to be a blessing to everyone.

The church accompanies the suffering people. It serves as a guiding light of optimism and empathy. It acts in a caring way to empower the people in pain. The churches in Asia responds to the COVID-19 crisis in sundry ways, not only spiritually, but also physically and psychologically.

## **5.2 Migrant workers**

I have organized the first online sharing of experiences, thoughts and recommendations, which dealt with the precarious predicament of migrant workers (ANON, 2020a). There are both domestic migrant workers and foreign migrant workers. Domestic migrant workers normally hail from far-flung villages and work in city centers within their own countries, while overseas migrant workers traverse national borders to seek better job opportunities.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimated that there are over 163.8 million migrant workers globally, of whom 68.1 million or 41.6% are women. The Asia and the Pacific region hosts 20.4% of migrant workers. About 11.6 million people in Southeast Asia and the Pacific are migrant workers, of whom 5.2 million are women. ILO indicates that about 91% of intra-ASEAN migrant workers go to Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore. Thailand and Malaysia host 35% each and Singapore 21%. Financially more affluent countries rely on migrant workers from poorer countries for their economies to function. At 40.8%, the Gulf states have the highest proper of migrant workers to all workers. The Gulf states host 13.9% of migrant workers from all over the world, the majority of whom hail from Southeast Asia and South Asia. There are also many female domestic workers in Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan who come from the Philippines, Indonesia and other low-income countries. All female domestic workers work and live with their employers at their residences, while male workers stay in labor

camps. As such, all of them do not have the opportunity to be in self-isolation or quarantine at the height of the pandemic.

At the time during which governments declared quarantine and lockdown, the low-income local and foreign migrant workers were the hardest hit. For example, Thailand hosts more than 4 million migrant workers; tens of thousands of migrant workers, both internal and foreign, instantly became jobless during the quarantine, many of whom defied orders not to travel with a view to prevent the spread of the virus. Instead, they rushed to return to their provinces in Thailand or to their homelands in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar where they at least have rice to eat. On the third weekend of March 2020, Bangkok's three main bus stations witnessed over 84,000 internal and foreign migrant workers moving to the provinces and neighboring countries. For fear of joblessness, roughly 60,000 migrant workers left Thailand. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) stated that undocumented migrant workers who came to Thailand irregularly face great risk of exploitation at this time of pandemic due to their lack of legal status.

In such a time of crisis, everyone seeks to go home and be with their loved ones. The undocumented are vulnerable and cannot go home. Those who remained have no means of sustenance for their survival, as day jobs are hard to come by. Migrant workers stranded in host cities and countries, including in the Gulf states, cannot return to their home countries as most airlines have shut down their operations and migrant workers could be penalized for returning to their homelands. Moreover, migrant workers often live in cramped living quarters which expose them to COVID-19 infection.

Home governments sing praises to migrant workers as current-day heroes, as their incomes are sent home as foreign remittances which boost the gross national product. However, they have inadequate access to medical care. Now, some of them have contracted COVID-19. They have no income and are fighting for their own survival. They are not given the proper and humane treatment due to all human beings in respect of our human dignity. The level of insecurity and risks for migrant workers are high. For this reason, this webinar aims to seek an introspection of church people about our Christian responsibilities and responses to COVID-19. Many migrant workers are overworked, underpaid, or even unpaid. The outbreak of the pandemic worsened the plight of migrant workers. Due to the lockdown, many companies closed their operations and many middle-class employers lost their work. As a consequence, many workers lost their employment, therefore losing their income. With no savings, they have problems servicing their debts and remitting money to their dependents in their home countries or home villages in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan and the Philippines. Migrant workers fall through the cracks. As disease spread, so do unemployment, poverty, hunger and overall suffering.

Churches are directly involved in addressing the effects of the pandemic on the people. Filipino, Indian, Indonesia and other diaspora churches in host countries worked promptly to



ensure the welfare of migrant workers, some of which opened centers to provide for the health, food, accommodation, mental health and information needs of the affected migrant workers in their own languages (MATHEN, 2020c). Upsurge in the demand for food, accommodation, mental and physical health services, overwhelm the churches everywhere, including diaspora churches, local churches and churches in the far-flung villages. Bishop Philip Huggins of Australia calls for greater ecumenical cooperation to respond to this crisis, as parochial church response is insufficient during this emergency.

During the online gathering, faith communities sought to understand the conditions of and express solidarity with Asian migrant workers during the coronavirus pandemic. The online meeting provided a forum during which representatives of churches and councils shared and provided an overview of the current situation of internal as well as foreign migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in the respective churches and councils in Asia and in the Gulf states. The online meeting was able to sensitize churches about the conditions, problems and needs of Asian migrant workers wherever they are during the pandemic. At the same time, churches shared information about the best practices of churches in aid of migrant workers in the time of this health crisis. Finally, the meeting advocated for church response based on lessons learned in addressing the needs of Asian migrant workers. Bishop Philip Huggins of Australia indicated that churches need to strengthen collaboration in order to serve the vulnerable people so that they can live with dignity and in peace.

### **5.3 Food insecurity**

I have coordinated the last CCA online gathering for the year 2020 that dealt with the pandemic. It dealt with the threat of food insecurity as a result of lockdowns during the pandemic. The pandemic worsened the food crisis which was a pre-existing condition in many poor countries and communities. While COVID-19 is an “equal opportunity” disease which infects everyone, the chances of getting the infection depends upon one’s economic income, which relates to one’s means of livelihood as well as place of residence. The poor have no place to go for “social distancing,” as they are either homeless or live in tightly packed rundown dwellings with several occupants in shantytowns or slum areas. Quarantine is a luxury that the poor cannot afford. Many migrant workers, who might be infected already, left their places of work in a hurry to rush home in the villages or in foreign countries. Hence, the risk of infection and casualty for the low-income folks is greater than for the middle class and the economic elite who have the means and can afford to dole out cash for hospitalization and intensive care. The survival rates of the rich are higher than the survival rates of the poor. The COVID-19 pandemic exposes the class divide.

When most governments around the world have declared mandatory quarantine and lockdowns for weeks or months, the said lockdowns have not affected much those with financial resources. While the rich can keep a stash of food and drinks to hoard them for use

during these rainy days, the poor not only lost their jobs or livelihoods, but also the means to feed their families. Joblessness equates to food insecurity. Many migrant workers who were not able to go back home in the villages or in foreign countries were stuck in their places of work but find themselves jobless, as businesses grind to a halt due to the lockdowns. Stranded migrant workers become invisible and are not qualified to receive any benefits, not even food aid. In many countries, low-waged earners who suddenly saw themselves jobless joined queues to get food and drinks that churches, mosques, temples, charitable institutions and nameless kind-hearted individuals shell out during this time of crisis. Governments in different countries provide different kinds of support and food subsidies during the pandemic, while millions upon millions of people in some countries have to fend for themselves. Publicity seekers see photo and media opportunities when they dole out masks and food to the poor.

Surely, lockdowns have led to the flattening of the COVID-19 curve which appears to flatten the world economy as well, which affects the vast majority of the people, especially the poor. Does the flattening of the COVID-19 curve likewise lead to the flattening of the food curve, which causes untold suffering to the poor who are now jobless? Because of lockdowns, most labor has ceased, including food production distribution and sale, for which reason food supply is dwindling. Farmers had to dump fresh agricultural produce in many parts of the world, as they could not cross demarcated areas which are cordoned off and quarantined. The current pandemic aggravates the preexisting food crisis, causing food insecurity.

Science dictates that the lockdown might have to be extended in order to save human lives. However, some are now demanding the opening of both the domestic and world economy immediately and would rather risk death than risk loss of livelihood and access to food. The natural consequence of unemployment is hunger. Are we headed towards mass starvation of biblical proportion? We are in a catch-22 situation. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, is a human tragedy of a famine pandemic in the offing?

Churches are concerned about and cared for the marginalized and the poor at the time during which the pandemic aggravates their suffering. The pandemic leads to unemployment and therefore lost of income during which the affected do not have the resources to purchase and procure their basic needs, including food. The World Food Programme (WFP) of the United Nations, which took part in the online meeting, indicated that “a looming global humanitarian catastrophe [...] could double the number of people who would face acute hunger and starvation” (MATHEN, 2020b). In addition, lockdowns and quarantines as a result of the pandemic worsen the disruption of food production, supply, processing and distribution, which could lead to famine.

An agrarian restructuring is the call of the day so as to allay the imminent food crisis. The pandemic revealed that the development model composed of neoliberal corporate globalization, transnational corporations and giant agri-businesses failed in providing food security and full employment. Rather, this development model exacerbated income inequality,

poverty and famine globally. The problem is the control and distribution of food based on profit and greed, not on satisfying the needs of the people.

Hence, faith-based agricultural experts in Asia concur that local and community-led sustainable agriculture of organic and biodiverse food sources is the portal to ensure food sovereignty, especially as agriculture, food security and livelihood are symbiotic (MATHEN, 2020b). Faith-based agricultural leaders agree that communities must be built on the basis of life-giving agriculture and restore relationships with nature, appealing to churches to resuscitate a new agrarian culture and make their lands available gratis to rural church members so that they can engage in self-sufficient farming. While there is a surplus of food supply, millions are hungry, not because of the lack of food.

The online consultation offered an opportunity during which attendees shared the food security situation during and after the pandemic in different contexts. People who shared their insights are directly involved in work related to food security. We sought recommendations on ways by which the impending food pandemic could be averted. At the same time, faith-based organizations were sensitized about the potential impending food crisis of biblical proportions that will affect millions of people. At the end of the day, the gathering explored ways by which churches, governments and non-governmental organizations can respond to counter food insecurity now and after the pandemic ends.

In summary, faith communities have responded to the urgent needs in the time of the coronavirus. Churches, church councils, faith-based organizations and individuals have acted swiftly by providing not only spiritual support, but also food, housing, medical and other relief needs of the suffering people, regardless of their social status. This article provided illustrations on the cooperation among church-based organizations, civil society organizations, international organizations and governments in alleviating the precarious situation of migrant workers and food insecurity.

## **CONCLUSION: TASKS AHEAD**

In the backdrop is climate emergency, whichever forces seize the moment during this conjuncture of virus and climate crises as well as the general crisis of the structure of the current international political economy will set the agenda in the post-pandemic period. This is the struggle between the forces of selfishness and greed on the one hand and of caring and sharing on the other hand.

This pandemic exposes the utter corruption of corporate globalists who only look after themselves. The current pandemic is a wake-up call for us to employ this short window of opportunity to push for our comprehensive agenda for economic, social, cultural, civil, political, environmental, climate and animal justice now.

Some ask: where's God? I ask: where's humanity? What are you doing in the face of the pandemic: nothing, withdraw from the world, pontificate, ill-intentioned and deliberately

spreading disinformation, well-intentioned but spreading misinformation, sharing scientific facts from reputable sources, or “I don’t give a damn as I have good immunity”, potentially spreading the virus to the vulnerable?

In his *Whether one may flee from a deadly plague*, Martin Luther (LUTHER, 1999) expressed that individuals make their own personal choices whether to leave or to stay. While asking for God to protect mercifully the people, he delineated certain responsibilities for people. Individuals must do what they can so as neither to get the disease nor to spread it to others, such as washing, quarantine and taking medicine. Pastors provide spiritual care. Parents and children take care of each other. Paid public officials such as public administrators, public health workers, cops and emergency responders ensure the safety and health of all. Service to God is a practice of faith via service to neighbors in need. In whatever capacity they can, Christians ought to help their neighbors in need in whatever capacity they can. Surely, all other religions have some teachings regarding assistance to the poor and the sick.

In the Old Testament (ANON, 2017), Noah’s ark reminds us that we need to be in self-isolation for the common good, not to procrastinate, to get on board, and to do what needs to be done. In the New Testament, Jesus always cared for the sick, the poor and the marginalized. We are called to be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (ANON, 2017).

In our time of the coronavirus pandemic, on the micro-level, we need to give whatever we can quietly to those in need, including our families, friends, neighbors, elderly, widows, children of others, orphans, travelers, strangers, refugees, migrant workers in cramped labor camps, detained undocumented migrants and those who don’t have money to stockpile supplies. Assistance can come in the form of listening ears, kindness, love, time, patience, talent, prayers, a helping hand, or treasures. If you have the wherewithal or spare resources, support others with food, medicine, soap, hand sanitizer, or money. Communicate: knock at the door of, send an email to, or call your family, friends, or neighbors, especially those who are alone, the elderly and widows, if there is anything they need, without compromising your and their health. Sincerely offer support, out of the compassion, neither for competition, nor honor, nor publicity. Verbally give thanks to the selfless health professionals who serve the sick. Support small local businesses. Seek the humanitarian release of old, sickly and non-violent prisoners who don’t pose public safety. Give decent tips to delivery drivers who were hitherto considered as unskilled workers but are now providing much needed emergency service.

On the macro-level, we have to reflect and act on structural changes now. Defend civil liberties. Support living wages, decent life, small local businesses, full medical care for all, protection of workers’ rights, government accountability to the people not to corporations, international solidarity not sanctions, emergency relief assistance, social services and social safety net for the poor, vulnerable and disadvantaged, including our planet and animals. Aside from stricter bans on the killing and consumption of wildlife, this pandemic has led to the clearing of the air in most parts of the world because of the temporary stoppage of most road

transportation and the shutdown of rapacious economic exploitation of nature in the form of industrial production of commodities produced which are meant to be obsolescent. The pandemic crisis is a justice crisis. The climate crisis is also a justice crisis. The people need to recapture power to control our livelihood, health, food and medicine, as the so-called free-market corporate globalization is exposed to have failed in providing the goods and services needed in the pandemic and well as the in protecting nature in general.

The public generally accept travel restrictions and physical distancing as appropriate to curb the spread of the coronavirus. However, shoring up their public images, many governments are using the pandemic to stifle legitimate critique and the opposition, limiting the freedom of speech and expression under the pretext of ceasing fake news. In one country, the security forces attack quarantine violators with canes, while in another country, its president orders troops to shoot them. In these times of emergency, political elites lust for and are engaged in power grabs that codify and further limit the rights of the people against which we must raise consciousness in order to push back against these encroachments on our rights. We have to keep an eye on and defend our civil liberties and human rights constantly.

Stay strong. Be optimistic. Care and share. Provide mutual assistance. Our compassion should show no borders. Don't lose hope. But hope is not a strategy. We need to be vigilant and take action now. Our destinies are all tied together, as we are all connected: humans and non-humans. When Japan sent supplies to China, on the boxes they put a Buddhist poem: "We have different mountains and rivers, but we share the same sun, moon and sky". When China sent medical masks to Italy, they put on the crates ancient Roman philosopher Seneca's poem: "We are waves from the same sea, leaves from the same tree, flowers from the same garden."

Žižek, who calls himself "an avowed Christian atheist" (ŽIŽEK, 2020), recalls in John 20,17 (ANON, 2017) where Jesus told Mary Magdalene "touch me not," when she did not recognize him after his resurrection. Not touching is reminiscent of our times during the pandemic. Žižek interprets this biblical passage as Jesus is among us, not as a physical being to be touched, but as a presence among us when we deal with each other with love and solidarity (ŽIŽEK, 2020). Now is the time to show siblinghood, care, love, solidarity, compassion, mutual assistance, as well as political commitment to action for deep structural changes in whatever way you can. Seize the moment: the time to act for people and Nature is now for greater shared sustainability and prosperity. Do whatever little or big thing you can do. Nothing is too small. The hour for change is now. ✨

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