

Book Review

by Mary YUEN

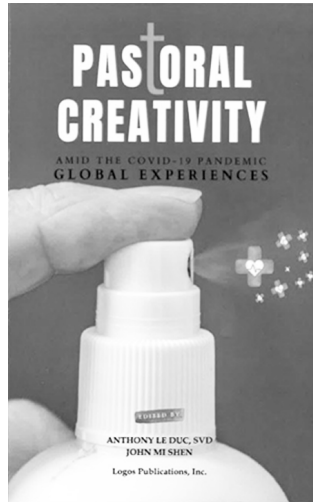
Anthony Le Duc and John Mi Shen, ed.

Pastoral Creativity amid the Covid-19 Pandemic: Global Experiences.

Manila: Logos Publications, Inc.

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Unemployment, businesses closed down, a rise in poverty and growing social inequality in different forms, and the worst of all – serious sickness and death after infecting virus. All these happened in the past few years. Although the virus is somewhat under control now, COVID-19 has truly brought many changes in the world, including separation between family members and friends and long-lasting socioeconomic consequences. It is not possible to return to normal as if nothing had happened. The Church community, like others in the society, was also seriously affected. Many activities had to be cancelled or taken on a different form. In spite of this, the signs of the times have called the Church to take solidarity action through new strategies of adaptation and adjustment. The churches all over the world have to think about innovative pastoral responses to such situation.

Pastoral Creativity amid the Covid-19 Pandemic: Global Experiences, edited by Anthony Le Duc, SVD and John Mi Shen who are both experienced in social communication, is a timely publication not only for us to understand the pastoral responses of the local churches from different parts of the world towards the pandemic, especially those in Asia. It also offers insightful theological and pastoral reflections, drawing lessons on what we can learn from these extraordinary experiences. The book is a collection of essays written by pastoral workers who shared their real-life experiences during the pandemic and their pastoral ministries. A few theologians offered synthesis and theological reflections after reading these essays. Among the 22 essays narrating rich and diversified pastoral experiences, more than half are from Asia (12 essays), including two from China, the others are from North America (5 essays) and Oceania (2 essays), with a single essay each from South America, Europe, and Africa. All the authors are active in pastoral ministry in various capacities in the Church.

The book is divided into four sections. The first three sections are essays recounting real-world experiences of pastoral agents, with focuses on parish ministry, education and formation ministry, and outreach ministries such as those with the poor and marginalized groups. The fourth section are essays of theological reflections based on these pastoral experiences, trying to understand the pastoral creativity in the contemporary world, exploring the lessons to be learned and discussing the implications that these experiences hold for

the post-pandemic Church. In the conclusion, the two editors propose a number of suggestions in the post-pandemic era. As realized by the editors, the experiences recounted in these essays cannot represent all the pastoral experiences occurred in different places but the book does include the voices of people of different culture and gender. It can truly enrich and substantiate the bigger story of pastoral creativity.

Due to the lockdown or quarantine measures in many places, as pointed out by most authors of the book, one of the central changes that have occurred during the pandemic was for churches to go virtual, taking to the social media platform in a new way. This change posed challenge to many pastors or pastoral workers but it also triggered off creative responses. The essays in the first two sections on Parish Ministry and Formation Ministry provide such creative responses through online activities by a number of authors. For example, a pastor in China stated that in the face of Mass-and-gathering suspension, after discussing with other pastors, they came up with a pastoral plan that aimed at building a network of communication, organizing bible classes by cloud, broadcasting the Holy Eucharist, offering pastoral care to the family and religious formation for children through online materials or livestreaming. The nearby local churches also collaborated with each other and shared available resources (pp. 68-69). Using audio-visual materials, some pastors in India reached out to many non-Christians and Christians of other denominations through online platforms. They started a musical rosary and other

creative popular devotions, and giving short speeches which were attractive to people. People can watch these videos again online (pp. 144-145).

Although some writers realize that attending Mass and activities online has its limitation, if one can make good use of it, online activities “can promote a new and healthy way for children, youth and adults to use cyberspace to meet and connect with one another easily”, as suggested by a seminarian in Thailand who organized summer catechism program for the youth (pp. 83-86). This new means can continue to be used when necessary. As Gnana Patrick suggests, “Let us not resist stubbornly the new awakenings and invitations of the creative spirit” (p. 198).

From the various experiences shared by the pastoral workers in the book, I am impressed and touched by their creativity and commitment, especially those involving in Outreach Ministry. For example, formation or check-in gatherings were offered online to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities who were isolated from society and unable to connect with their families and friends (p. 80). Meditation practice or prayer ministry (including check-ins, meditation process, personal sharing and ritual) was offered to people with a great sense of vulnerability or being excluded, in order to overcome the feelings of uncertainty (pp. 119-120). A hotline of consultation for the undocumented was created for migrant workers in Thailand who had fear and anxiety under the pandemic (p. 129).

In order to mitigate the family problems, an online group named “Spiritual Integration for Charity in Special Time” was created in China. This group took advantage of all possible resources, provided support for Christian families, encouraging the family members to improve relationships and live harmoniously with one another (pp. 160-161).

As Shiju Paul suggests, the pandemic “challenges us for greater introspection in our ways of embodying radical compassion of Jesus especially with persons who suffer stigmatization, discrimination and exclusion” (p. 126). Apart from taking care of the brothers and sisters in our Church community, we should not neglect the vulnerable in the society.

In the section of Theological Response, several theologians offer insightful reflections. God’s love inspires people to do various things in the face of the pandemic. Stephen Beavens calls such actions “collateral grace” – traces of God’s presence in the midst of the horror and suffering of the pandemic. They are ways that God is making ways out of no way, with our help, in partnership with God’s beloved daughters and sons. Moreover, the God in the Spirit is also active in offering “tough grace” – revelations that convict us of sin. Working to reveal the sins that in many ways caused the pandemic, and to alleviate these conditions, will surely be part of the work of the church’s mission (pp. 177-178).

Indian theologian Gnana Patrick highlights that the

pastoral initiatives undertaken by different people become “theologies in action” or “performative theologies”, responding to the present moment in terms of activities, as well as experiencing God in the present which inspires sympathy, communion on the part of the human with God and the other, especially the suffering other. Patrick argues that it needs new mindset of faith to continue to collaborate with God to respond to the pandemic. The creative efforts narrated in the book are some theological moments of such collaboration (pp. 200-201).

John Mansford Prior, a missionary from England who worked in Indonesia for many years, suggests that the experiences of the pandemic alert us that the bishops and clergy with their pastoral councils are no longer the sole leadership in the Church: individuals and networks have become more decisive. Indeed, all pastoral agents, clerical, lay or religious have their essential roles in the Church. Prior emphasizes that the pandemic invites us to think outside the clerical box, and to return to the time of the Apostolic Church, when the faithful gathered in people’s homes. The essays in this book invite us to rethink the model of the Church that we have long accepted as being the norm, not just intellectually, but also visually and emotionally. We need imagination to be empathetic, creative, and wise in order to be able to solve problems, as depicted by the authors in the essays (p. 204).

Christina Kheng of Singapore affirms that certain

principles of Ignatian Spirituality can be helpful in responding to this crisis and building back better. These principles include contemplation in action, appreciating the grace of vulnerability, called to mission through discernment, the practice of spiritual conversation in the spirit of synodality and collaboration, transformation and seeing hope through suffering, Divine foundation and ordering choices towards God's greater glory (pp. 206-215). Kheng claims that the pandemic has challenged but also brought out the best in our shared spirituality.

Communication scholar Anthony Le Duc insists that digital technology should not be dismissed as virtual, less-than-real or not fully genuine. He points out that if digital technology and cyberspace are recognized as "fruit of human ingenuity" that "must be placed at the service of the integral good of the individual and of the whole of humanity", as affirmed by Pope Benedict, then digital leadership and presence cannot simply be a temporary solution to sustain ministry while the pandemic was happening, but it must be incorporated thoughtfully into the Church's long-term pastoral agenda in the post-pandemic era (pp. 227-228).

At the end, the two editors of the book discuss the implications and pose some questions so that every pastoral worker and the Church as a whole can further reflect on what have been learnt in the past few years during the pandemic and what to do in the future. Some of the relevant questions include: How does online presence fit into the vision

presented by communion ecclesiology which is so important to the life of the modern Church? In what ways did certain practices that became normal during the pandemic faithful to or contrary to the incarnational theological framework so essential to Christian pastoral theology? What pastoral theological standards should govern the work of pastoral workers in the digital milieu where pastoral opportunities are ever expanding both in the online and offline arenas? All these questions deserve our attention and examination seriously.